Good Morning, Children: My First Years in Early Childhood Education

by Sophia E. Pappas
Good Morning, Children
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Dedication

To my preschool students:
Give yourselves a kiss on the brain for being such creative and critical thinkers, and give yourselves a humongous hug for acting so kind and responsible. I love you all and feel privileged to have been your teacher. As you move on through elementary and high school, college and beyond, remember what we used to say: “You can do it, I know you can.”

To my students’ families:
Thank you for entrusting me with the care and education of your children in their first year of schooling. Our partnership was crucial to your children’s success. I know we share the belief that your children can go “sky high,” as one of you once told me; and I hope the foundation we built will facilitate the realization of their potential in the years to come.

To my readers:
I hope to spark an ongoing dialogue around the prospects and challenges of high-quality early childhood education with a diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents and family members, policymakers, the media, and others interested in the topic. Please visit sophiapappas.com to continue the conversation and to email me directly.

It is purely coincidental that the title of this Gryphon House book, Good Morning, Children, is similar to the website for Good Morning Children, Ltd. There is no direct or implied partnership between the two companies. However, if you are looking for educational resources for young children, you might visit www.goodmorningchildren.com.
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This memoir and my growth as a teacher would not have been possible without the support of many individuals. First, the Teach For America-Newark staff provided the steadfast guidance and encouragement I needed to become a strong leader for my kids. Susan Asiyani, John White, Mark Williams, and Abigail Wentworth challenged me to step up and to believe in myself even when I felt disappointed in my performance those first few months in the classroom. I have to extend a special thanks to Mark Williams in particular, for the countless hours he spent observing my teaching and guiding my self-reflection process. His mix of tough love and high expectations for me and my students strengthened my independent problem-solving skills in the classroom. Secondly, Ms. Morrison, my teaching assistant with years of experience in early childhood education, taught me a great deal about meeting the needs of pre-K students and working with families. Our collaboration throughout the three years I taught at Carter Elementary School produced strong results for our Pre-K 111 and Pre-K 114 students. Moreover, our friendship made each day a pleasure.

Thank you to Libby Doggett, Executive Director of Pre-K Now, for giving me the opportunity to share my experiences and engage others in a dialogue around high-quality pre-K through Pre-K Now’s blog, Inside Pre-K, during the 2006–7 school year. I also want to thank Mathew Mulkey, Director of Communications at Pre-K Now, for training me on the technical use of the blog and editing my entries on a weekly basis. The blog advanced my own professional development by serving as an outlet for my reflections and as a way to share best practices with other teachers. This book would not have been possible without the blog because Gryphon House publishers contacted me after reading about my experiences on the site. Gryphon House has been such a strong and pivotal partner in the creation of this work. Thank you for taking a chance on a first-
time writer and thereby giving a voice to my experiences and the experiences of my students.

My involvement in Teach For America’s early childhood education initiative, while I was teaching, also helped me improve my craft and share my insights with other teachers preparing to enter the classroom. Thank you to Alisa Szatrowski for putting ideas and reflections from my classroom in an ECE training text for Teach For America corps members. And thank you to Catherine Brown, former Director of Teach For America’s ECE initiative, for giving me the chance to help train Teach For America’s first cohort of ECE teachers. Catherine Brown and Lee McGoldrick, Vice President of Growth Strategy at Teach For America, moreover, gave me the opportunity to strengthen my skills as a leader by hiring me to spearhead efforts to bring more of our nation’s future leaders into pre-K classrooms in rural and urban regions across the country. I am also grateful to Wendy Kopp, both for inspiring me with her own steadfast leadership in the fight to eliminate educational inequity and for supporting my efforts, first to grow the early childhood education initiative at Teach for America and then to share my classroom insights in this book. Lastly, Teach For America’s national ECE advisory board consisting of experts in the early childhood education field provided insight from their years of experience in the field that helped me situate my time in the classroom within the broader context of ECE in our country.

Kathleen O’Pray, the other pre-kindergarten teacher at my school, brought decades of experience, both as a lower-elementary teacher and CBO Director to Carter. I am grateful to her for helping me gain a better understanding of the nuances of our pre-K curriculum, for sharing best practices from her classroom, and for welcoming my ideas. And thank you to Kathleen, John Holland, Abigail Wentworth, Cheryl Steighner, and all others who supported my efforts to generate a dialogue among other early childhood educators by contributing comments to my blog.
Thank you to the other teachers and administrators at my school for welcoming me into the Carter family from day one. In particular, I want to acknowledge my principal for supporting my efforts to build strong relationships with my students and families by allowing me to hold special family events in my classroom such as our “Giving Thanks” party and “Family Show and Tell.” Thank you to the cafeteria, custodial, and clerical office staff for providing various forms of support that helped me serve the needs of my students and their families. Also, thank you to my first master teacher from the district for providing constant encouragement and the positive reinforcement that helped give me the confidence I needed that second time around as a teacher.

My family and friends have also been critical to my growth on so many levels. First, my mother and father have always stressed the importance of education. Thanks, Mom, for challenging the school psychologist at my kindergarten screening test to see the true potential behind my shy demeanor. That story continues to help me understand the importance of investing considerable time in getting to know my own students rather than passing judgments based on their behavior the first days and weeks of school. Thanks, Dad for providing me with such a strong example through all your hard work, integrity, and perseverance. And to my siblings, Joey and Christina, thank you for being a constant source of unconditional support and comic relief, especially during those difficult times my first year in the classroom. To Jo-Jo, Vicki, Jeralyn, and Sam, my dear friends from childhood: thanks for always taking the time to listen and taking a strong interest in my class. I must also acknowledge my boyfriend, Greg, who helped me overcome challenges and build on successes by listening to me on the tough days and celebrating with me on the good ones. Thanks to all of my family and friends who shared their diverse experiences with my students either by visiting our classroom or via email: Kopa, Stephanie, Jo-jo, Jeralyn, Justin, Matt, Vicki, Greg, Dad, Mom, Christina, Alicia, John, Alex, Evanthea, and Renata.
I must also acknowledge, once again, my students and their families. Their stories are the heart of this book and the driving force behind my commitment to education reform in our country.

Preface

When I think about the future of our society, its opportunities, power dynamics, and overall vibrancy, I think about my kids—my pre-Kindergarten students—whose needs, strengths, personalities, and families commanded my full attention for three years. Each year, these students entered my classroom at a crucial stage of their development, a period that would help shape much of their mental processes as well as their attitudes towards themselves and others. How I treated them, how I addressed their needs and interacted with their families, would significantly influence their life trajectories. I took these responsibilities seriously and used them to guide my approach to teaching.

I entered the classroom in 2003 as a Teach For America corps member in Newark, New Jersey. After studying political systems and leaders, both in my undergraduate courses at Georgetown and as an intern on Capitol Hill, I knew I wanted to play an active role in rectifying societal inequities, but I did not know exactly how I could give back to the world. Although I wrote an almost 200-page thesis on education reform in post-apartheid South Africa and U.S. inner cities, I felt removed from the real challenges facing disadvantaged communities and unsure about how to overcome these challenges. Short-term, superficial attempts to address our nation’s greatest injustice seemed to haunt the history of education reform; and the persisting gaps between children in low-income and high-income areas mock the very notion of equal opportunity. I sought a solution that reflected the complexity and urgency of the problem.
Teach For America proposed a groundbreaking way to address this crucial issue: enlist our nation’s most promising future leaders in a movement to ensure that all children, regardless of their circumstances, have the opportunity to receive an excellent education. During my two-year commitment to Teach For America and additional third year in the classroom, I would gain firsthand the insights necessary to effect systemic change while helping my students acquire concrete skills they could take with them to the next grade. That unique combination of impact and learning was critical to my decision to take hold of the opportunity that Teach For America offered: the chance to lead a group of children toward excellence, and to understand more fully the prospects and challenges that come with trying to ensure that our educational and cultural institutions respect and uphold the dignity and worth of all children as individuals. The success I experienced with my students would solidify my belief in the ability of our country to tackle a problem that many deem a lost cause. After seeing my students “beat the odds” at the pre-K level, I can move forward both with the knowledge that breaking down cycles of poverty is possible, and that my teaching experience provided me with a foundation of firsthand insights into how to achieve that goal. Moreover, because I am part of a network of more than 12,000 Teach For America alumni serving in a variety of professional positions, all working to improve the life prospects for students everywhere, I know that I am not alone in this endeavor.

The rigor and intensity of Teach For America’s selection process introduced me to an organization intent on giving students in rural and urban low-income areas the high-quality instructional leaders they deserve. In the days after my interview with Teach For America, I remember anxiously awaiting a response, concerned that I did not adequately convey my passion for eliminating educational inequity. I was ecstatic when I received the acceptance letter. Yet at that point, I could not imagine what a profound impact my experience as a Teach For America corps member would have on the way I saw education reform and my future life path.
My students resided in a low-income area in Newark, New Jersey. Most of their life circumstances put them at a greater statistical risk for dropping out of high school, as well as experiencing future incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and unemployment. When they entered school at age four, they were already behind their peers in more affluent communities. Indeed, according to Nobel Laureate of Economics, James Heckman, nearly half of the achievement gap we see in high school between African-American and Caucasian children is already present before kindergarten. Providing high-quality pre-K education to children from low-income areas is one of the first steps in leveling the playing field; it helps close the achievement gap before it widens even further. Such programs are certainly not a panacea, but they are a necessary step in improving the quality of early childhood education. Recent increases in support among policymakers in various states suggest that interest in such programs is growing. In 2007, nearly 30 governors pushed for more funding for their state pre-K initiatives (Vu 2007). Teach For America started strategically placing cohorts of pre-K teachers in some of its regions in 2006 and is likely to reach over 8,000 three- and four-year-olds in 2010.

While these proposals are encouraging, it is important that individuals and organizations move forward with a nuanced understanding of the challenges and prospects facing all pre-K programs. First, policymakers need to maximize the positive impact of their initiatives by shaping and supporting programs with effective educators and sound accountability structures. If districts or states are going to develop criteria for selecting and evaluating pre-K teachers, they need to have a clear picture of the characteristics of effective educators. Likewise, if they are designing assessment systems and curricula, a teacher’s perspective on the accuracy and value of different forms of assessment and curricula would be invaluable. Educators, family members, and the media also need an informed opinion as they evaluate these programs. That is why when I heard that the organization Pre-K Now—a national non-profit advocating high-quality, voluntary pre-K for all for all three- and four-year-olds—was looking
for a teacher to share her insights through a weekly blog, I thought I could help by contributing my experiences to the debates surrounding early childhood education. I also wanted to engage teachers and others interested in pre-K in discussions on topics ranging from how best to teach letter recognition to the investment of family members in my classroom. I certainly did not (and still do not) have all the answers. Rather, I wanted to use the blog as a way to describe my growth as a teacher and aspiring policymaker. With this in mind, my entries reflected on my daily experiences. I wrote two to three pieces a week, and responded to comments my readers posted. In the process, I gave my students and their families a voice in this country’s discourse on how best to serve our youngest and most impressionable learners.

I started the blog by brainstorming possible topics: the structure of our day, students’ struggles with basic literacy skills, students with varied levels of family support, and so on. As I moved forward, I realized that the most substantive pieces I wrote came more naturally from listening to and watching my students. If I was going to tell their stories, the subjects of my entries needed to develop from those issues that stood out at any given time, rather than an artificial timeline I created on a Sunday afternoon away from the classroom. In a sense, this process mirrors the way I became an effective pre-K teacher. I started with a scripted curriculum that dictated lessons for my students before I even knew their names. The program, divorced from my students’ actual needs and learning styles, could not provide a solid academic and social foundation. The weekly themes and daily scripts could not meet my students where they were, and then get them to where they needed to be. Once I designed long-term plans and daily lessons using student anecdotes and work samples and state standards for pre-K, I started to see progress.

This process, more broadly, speaks to the importance of understanding the situations educators seek to change. My time as a Teach For America corps member taught me that if we want to shape academic opportunities that will
close the achievement gap, we must have firsthand insight into the experiences of children at the losing end of those disparities. As a pre-K teacher in an inner-city public school, I was not only on the front lines. I was a leader on the first line of defense against educational inequity.


**Introduction**

This book is a collection of my reflections on my first two years in a pre-K classroom, blog entries from my third year of teaching, and concrete tools for early childhood educators. Most of the details pertaining to students in my class, however, are from the 2006–2007 school year.

It was hard to determine the scope and target audience of this book because my reasons for becoming a teacher and insights that grew from my experiences in the classroom get to the core of so many different facets of my background, worldview, and future aspirations. I could speak to academics and policymakers after studying race, culture, and politics as an undergraduate and then witnessing the successes and shortcomings of education reform efforts firsthand in the classroom. I could address a much broader audience as a deeply proud American whose family achieved incredible social mobility after just two generations in our country, but who views the gap between the promises of our founders and the reality of stark societal inequities. This book could also use my development as a classroom leader as an example of the kind of change my generation as a whole can achieve. I decided, however, to target
my story primarily towards educators. Teachers have so much influence in our society, and yet we still struggle to understand fully how teachers become effective, whether or not they come from traditional education backgrounds. I certainly do not have all the answers, but I hope to contribute my experiences to this ongoing dialogue.

Here are a few of the 14 incredible four-year-olds who started school for the first time in my class during that year. All adults’ and children’s names, including blog entries, have been changed throughout the book to protect their identity.

- Tyrone—or Doctor Smith, as we called him in Dramatic Play—had a strong foundation in basic literacy knowledge, but he was not very invested in the class at the beginning of the year. His attention span was shorter than most of the children during circle time, and he was often sitting and looking around the room, not participating with the other children or listening to me. He showed improvement in this over the course of the school year, and began to respond positively to activities such as singing songs about his classmates, as well as other more hands-on tasks.

- Kevin came to school with strong math and literacy foundations. He picked up new academic concepts quickly and consistently participated in class activities. Socially, however, he struggled and frequently cried when he was not picked for an activity or had to wait his turn. He was the only child in his household, which may account for some of the difficulties.

- Karen arrived in my class with a strong academic foundation, but until coming to school, she did not have much contact with other children. She had been around adults for most of her early years and initially displayed a hesitation to interact with the other children. From day one, she followed directions and was focused and actively engaged in whole-group activities.
Over the year, Karen made real progress interacting with the other children, particularly in smaller groups, and frequently read, shared, and played with her classmates.

I was also fortunate to have a teacher’s aide, Ms. Morrison, who has been working with young learners for more than 20 years. Her experience was immensely helpful, and our students benefited from our strong collaboration.

I hope this book sheds light on the lives we hoped to enrich through high quality pre-K.

**Learning Labs, Centers, and Choice Time: A Note About Terminology**

My school used a scripted program my first year in the classroom. At that time, the district allowed each school to choose from several research-based pre-K curricula.

The scripted curriculum focuses on a different theme each week. Children spend about two hours per day in learning labs. The labs are similar to centers in that children choose to play in one of 10 areas. In each, they explore and learn a wide range of skills and concepts. Teachers change some of the materials in the labs each week to correspond to each theme (for example, for the theme “Pet Parade” the teacher would transform the Dramatic Play learning lab into a pet store) and generate enthusiasm for the thematic developments during the lab tour and while they interact with children during the actual lab time.

After my first year in the classroom, the Newark Office of Early Childhood decided to adopt a single curriculum for all of the Abbott pre-K programs in the district (both school and center based). Instead of prescribed weekly themes, teachers develop topic studies with children that can go as long as the
children’s interest in that topic lasts. Children spend about two hours per day in centers, which are similar to labs, but are called “Choice Time” to emphasize the importance of the child’s choice during that time. Teachers build on students’ interests to advance their skill and knowledge base by interacting with them during choice time using their knowledge of each child’s strengths and weaknesses.

**Note:** At times in the classroom, I deviated slightly from both curricula to meet the needs of my students. For purposes of clarity, in this book I will use the terms for the scripted curriculum when talking about my first year and those for the other curriculum when talking about subsequent years in the classroom.
Part One

Becoming an Effective Teacher: Reflections on My First Year
Teaching Pre-K?

I remember the first time my Program Director, Mark Williams, from Teach For America approached me about teaching pre-Kindergarten. I was riding in a car with a fellow corps member and I thought the reception on my cell phone was failing me. It wasn’t.

“I’m sorry, you’re breaking up...did you say pre-K? As in four-year-olds?”

Needless to say, I had mixed feelings. I did not yet understand the importance of teaching students before kindergarten. My mind filled with visions of temper tantrums, bathroom accidents, and an endless stream of tears. I thought about my own pre-K experience and could remember only a difficult transition from home to school and the sheer disappointment of attending “Romper Room”—which, contrary to my initial assumption and hope, was not in fact the site of the joyful 1980s television show, but, rather a small, unpublicized nursery school on Long Island.

On top of this general reluctance, I felt a deep anxiety about stepping back into the classroom after my first experience as a corps member. I was initially placed in a fourth grade position at a K–8 school in Newark. My good intentions, Georgetown diploma, and overall relentlessness failed to translate into strong leadership for the students in my class. My principal ultimately decided to release me from my school and recommend that I be transferred to another school in the district after just three months in the classroom.

I did not feel ready for this second attempt at teaching, this second chance. From the moment I cracked open Teach For America’s training materials during the spring semester of my senior year of college, it was clear that high expectations for my students were vital to facilitating their growth. I still
believed wholeheartedly in their abilities, but could not say the same for my own potential as a teacher. Self-doubt threatened to paralyze my efforts to persevere as a teacher and leader, and I feared that this would prevent my students from mastering crucial foundational skills and realizing their own potential.

Luckily, perseverance won out. I would teach again, and this time I would find a way to succeed. I was determined to succeed.

The support of Teach For America’s Newark regional staff was pivotal in mentally preparing me to reenter a Newark public school with the necessary confidence and vision. Regional Program Directors are a critical part of Teach For America’s support structure for corps members during their two-year teaching commitment. Regional Program Directors are former teachers who, after being successful in their own classrooms and demonstrating skills needed to lead other teachers, support about 35 corps members through classroom observations, one-on-one conferences, and constant efforts to help their corps members identify and pursue additional professional development opportunities. This description may be helpful as a job posting, but it fails to describe the full scope of actions Mark, my regional Program Director, took to foster my growth as a teacher.

JUNE 28

Not a Coddling Mentor

I knew even before I met Mark in person that he was serious about his job. His attention to detail permeated everything from his communication about my teacher certification courses to the Newark regional guide he provided that described various neighborhoods in Northern New Jersey where I might live. He
approached each of our interactions with a high degree of professionalism and expected nothing less of the corps members he supported. Most of us were recent college graduates who came directly from school to the Newark region for induction and would be living at Fordham University during our summer training institute. Mark was quick to make it clear that Teach For America would in no way be an extension of college. We were now professionals who would be held accountable for our work with children.

As a manager, Mark understood the power of knowing your audience and communicating accordingly. He knew that a corps member having a tough time might need a few minutes of lighthearted conversation before talking about classwork. He knew that sometimes it takes a half hour chatting with a district human resources bureaucrat to make sure a teacher’s paperwork is processed in a timely fashion. In short, he was amiable, but professional, and always able to get the job done.

Mark’s unrelenting commitment to his teachers and the Teach For America movement as a whole was evident from the start. I truly grasped what this meant during the last night of my summer training in the Bronx.

JULY

Reflections on Mark and Training at Teach For America’s Summer Institute

I had a tough time at the summer training institute, both with my teaching of middle-school summer classes, as well as my ability to collaborate with the other three corps members with whom I was teaching on a rotating schedule.
The diligent student in me that had wowed professors with well-crafted essays quickly mastered the art of designing a five-step lesson plan. My fledgling management skills, however, undermined any chance these plans had for successful implementation. Teach For America stressed the importance of strong classroom management and provided concrete strategies for developing routines and procedures that would make things run smoothly. Long before I even stepped foot in my summer school class, I had read about these strategies, observed them in action in several classes in Newark and New York, and written out the details of systems I would use. Yet when it came time to stand in front of the class and use these systems to teach, I grew tense and unsure of myself. When things did not go according to plan, I was not flexible or assertive enough to bring the class back to attention. All I saw was a failed plan, hours of preparation wasted. All I felt was exhaustion after staying up until three in the morning, finishing graphic organizers on chart paper. I went to bed without enough physical energy to wash the orange-marker stains off my fingers, though not too tired to feel a rush of anxiety about teaching in just a few hours.

In college, I could go home and sleep after pulling an all-nighter. Now I had to pull myself together, control my nerves for the 10 minutes I had to scarf down my breakfast, get on that bus, and teach.

Mark saw all of this when he came to visit my class. He maintained a stoic demeanor to avoid disrupting or upsetting me further. He sat for about 10 minutes and left a note on the back desk. As the class abruptly left the room for lunch while I scrambled to collect the Venn Diagram assignments a handful of the students had completed, I was both curious about the note and deathly afraid of reading it. The large block letters spelling out TEACH FOR AMERICA on the stationery reminded me of why I was there in the first place, and made me feel queasy considering just how disappointed I was in my teaching performance. Mark’s words, however, offered both comfort and hope. “Ms.
Pappas—Thanks for letting me stop by. Nice job on the agenda to keep them focused. Hang in there. We’ll talk later—MW.” NICE JOB...HANG IN THERE...WE’LL TALK LATER.” I went through the rest of the day’s sessions eagerly anticipating some helpful advice that now outweighed any concern of a critique that might hurt my feelings.

**J U L Y 2 6**

**Toward Understanding and Competence**

Our appointment was at 7 p.m. Mark was finishing up with another meeting, and the room was filled with other first-year Teach For America corps members from about five regions. These teachers were problem solving with their program directors, discussing everything from how to check for understanding in the middle of a lesson to revisiting classroom procedures to how to collect assignments in ways that will increase efficiency and reduce behavioral disruptions.

Mark finished up and could tell I was not up for sitting in a room buzzing with collegial exchanges. He suggested we talk outside. We sat on the steps and began talking about my experiences in the classroom, my time as an undergraduate, and my workaholic/perfectionist tendencies. I barely looked at my watch because we became so engaged in a discussion about time management, confidence, and what it means to be prepared each day to teach. Mark listened attentively and challenged me to redefine my approach to success. If I were going to stand in front of a group of children each day ready to implement plans and, at the same time, respond to unexpected occurrences, I needed to be more efficient with my planning time, assert myself as the leader in the classroom, and have the management systems and overall
composure to maintain control of the class. He listened carefully and shared more about his own classroom experience, including modeling a few examples. He said that becoming a strong teacher is a process and that this would be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue. He didn’t once look at his watch, but as I started to feel my eyes grow heavy I glanced down and noticed that three hours had passed. I felt tired and still not entirely confident in my abilities as a teacher, but much better, nonetheless. As Mark said, this would be the beginning of a process towards excellence.

As I returned home, I felt like I was transitioning from a place of confusion and helplessness towards one of understanding and competence.

**NOVEMBER**

**Still Stumbling—The Process Continues**

I came back from Thanksgiving break feeling defeated and exhausted and without a teaching position. Once again, Mark was there. He said that the Newark team should be able to find me a new job, so I should come by the regional office and be ready to move forward. Mark saw in me a commitment to professional improvement that he believed would translate into positive results for a group of children in Newark.
Out of a Rut: Stepping Back to Reflect on Leadership

As Mark and I walked towards the Teach For America office, we started to talk about leadership; well, leadership and the caramel macchiato I was going to buy for Mark to thank him for coming to see me.

Once he got his caffeine fix, Mark and I got down to business: the business of my rebirth as a Teach For America corps member. Knowing my interest in politics, Mark said, “Think about the strong leaders you know on Capitol Hill and in history. What are they like, especially in difficult circumstances?”

I reflected on leaders past and present working to advance unpopular reforms that often conflicted with prevailing attitudes. They didn’t allow obstacles or resistance to defeat them. In fact, those challenges further fueled their momentum. They maintained their composure, worked tirelessly to help others, and forged ahead to advance their cause. I needed to do the same.

One Step Closer to Pre-K

The process of finding and securing a new placement took several months, but eventually a pre-K opportunity came. I then had to apply my developing understanding of strong leadership to my preparation to meet the needs of young learners. I needed to move beyond my initial reservations about pre-K by understanding more fully the stakes, prospects, and challenges involved. I began to read more about early childhood education in low-income
communities, particularly in New Jersey. I soon learned that if I embraced the idea of introducing my students to the importance and benefits of school, I could set the tone for how they thought about themselves, their peers, and the adults in their lives. The prospect of being the first person to greet students at a classroom door, ever, seemed both intimidating and empowering. Mark, with his own experience as an excellent kindergarten teacher, helped me see it as the latter. He noted that in his own classroom he could tell which students had gone to pre-K by their comparatively stronger listening and early literacy skills. And with the Abbott programs in our district making pre-K education available to all children in the district, either in school settings or Community Based Organizations (CBOs), these students were not just the ones with particularly involved families. Mark assured me that I would not just be “skimming the cream.” Mark’s insights, coupled with my own observations of pre-K and kindergarten classes in both my inner-city district and a nearby affluent suburb, highlighted the critical role I could play in closing the achievement gap as a pre-K teacher.

M A R C H 2

Happy Birthday Dr. Seuss and Ms. Pappas: A Pre-K Placement at Last

I learned that it is one thing to want to teach pre-K in Newark, but it is another to secure a placement. And it is yet another thing to start teaching at that site. While reaching Community Based Organizations (CBOs) was difficult, partly because so many people seemed to be in charge, I ultimately connected with a CBO that had Abbott pre-K classrooms funded by the state. I went through a phone interview, an in-person interview, several weeks of emailing
back and forth, as well as a handful of scheduling mishaps with a woman whose email address ironically started with the phrase “Make It Happen,” before I secured a final interview.

Mark was glad to hear I was moving forward with the placement process. I still had mixed feelings about my abilities as a pre-K teacher as I got on the bus and rode up Clinton Avenue towards the center. My thoughts went back and forth between a positive image of myself working with young children as they actively explored materials, and the terrifying prospect of failing to create a highly functioning and productive classroom. The only distraction that calmed me down was to count the number of churches along the way. That worked, and by the time I arrived at my destination and rang the bell, my nerves were partially at ease.

The ninth church that I counted housed in its basement the pre-K program for which I was hoping to work. Because I was eager to keep the ball rolling, I arrived early, and had to wait about twenty minutes before the interview. In the meantime, I saw several families pick up their children. It was Dr. Seuss’s birthday, so the children that passed by all had tall red and white striped-paper hats on their heads, not to mention large smiles on their faces, just the kind of looks that you would expect to see on a four-year-old coming from a special celebration. The joy was clear and, as anyone who spends any time with preschool-aged children knows, so pure and palpable, that it even made an anxious, self-defeated young teacher forget about her challenges. Well, at least until the Executive Director said, “Come on in, Ms. Pappas.”

The Executive Director was at first a bit skeptical of my intentions. When I referred to my past experiences as a teenager working with young children in my own neighborhood, he asked, “Would you approach your work with our students with the same tenacity?” I remember being shocked because—for one thing—my time spent with young Greek-American children in an affluent
suburb consisted of babysitting, informal story time, and the occasional art project. I explained to the director that it seemed obvious to me that students coming to pre-K already at a disadvantage would require committed teachers prepared to give them more attention and targeted instruction than students in higher income areas who typically come to school with a stronger foundation of cognitive and language/literacy skills. In short, children in low-income communities didn’t need equal treatment, they needed something more, otherwise they would always be struggling to catch up. My strong opinions helped overcome some of my lingering anxieties. I demonstrated my commitment both by conveying these views and sharing the written plans I had prepared for the class. In the end, the director appreciated my enthusiasm and gave me the job. He even let me come by the center to observe a typical day before I actually started teaching.

M A R C H 9

Ups and Downs: The Journey Continues

On my observation day, I was all set to stay the entire day and start setting up my room after the children left. That morning, I met some of the children and started to take notes about their skill levels, interests, and personalities. Soon after, the director abruptly came in and told me I had to leave because some officials from the state were coming in to inspect the center. He said they would call me and that I would most likely still be able to start on Monday. An hour later, I received a call from the center saying they were very sorry but because of financial circumstances, they would not be able to hire me at this time. Soon after, Teach For America-Newark’s Executive Director came into the office to see if we had heard about the state discovering significant financial mismanagement at a number of centers in Newark. Apparently many centers,
including the one where I was going to work, were using Abbott funds to support non-Abbott programs within their centers (for example, centers could offer daycare at their site in addition to state funded pre-K).

Luckily, I was able to find another job at a school for the fall a few months after the first job lost its funding. Nevertheless, the experience of seeing financial mismanagement take my job away and negatively affect the educational opportunities of so many children was an important lesson about one of the variety of ways in which children from low-income communities can be put at an educational disadvantage.

AUGUST 20

The Wheels on the Bus

I remember sitting on the New Jersey transit bus, anxious to see my school and start setting up my room. As the bus pulled out of Newark Penn Station, through the downtown area on Broad Street, towards the South Ward of Newark, I started to wonder what my future students were doing in their last few weeks before the start of pre-K. The appearance of my room and my approach to these children and their families would shape their first impression of school. What did they expect? What prior experiences with adults and other children would they bring to my class?

As I sat on the bus, contemplating the mindsets of the 15 four-year-olds who would be my students, a man next to me looked at my large crate filled with cleaning supplies, alphabet charts, and bulletin board decorations, and asked, “You a teacher?” I overcame my hesitation and responded, “Yes, well I will be soon.” He then asked if I would be teaching in Livingston, a higher income suburb at the end of the bus line. Unlike his first question, I responded to this
one quickly and without hesitation: “No, in Newark at Carter Elementary School.” His eyes widened as he leaned back in his seat and said, “Wow, really, are you serious?” I suspected some reference to my age or race would follow, but instead he exclaimed, “I went to Carter Elementary School years ago! Is Ms. Smith still there? She was mean.” Just then a young woman chimed in, “You had Ms. Smith too? Yeah, she used to call me out, but Ms. Jackson was real nice.” I told them this would be my first time at the school, but I would see if those teachers were still there. The man then peered out the window, noticing that the stop for Carter Elementary School was approaching and said, “Oh, here’s the stop.” We then left the bus together.

As the 70-bus to Livingston pulled away, I saw a small church on the corner, a corner store in the distance, and individual houses lining the street, one of which my bus partner entered after saying goodbye. I also noticed a man sweeping garbage off the street. He did not wear a uniform; he just seemed to be a resident intent on keeping the neighborhood clean. As I walked away from him and closer to my school, the litter seemed to get worse. I wondered how my kids would view school if garbage lined the entrance to the building.

AUGUST 20

A Classroom of My Own

I had planned to ask a series of questions about the school and discuss my “School Preparation Action Plan” (an extensive list of preparation steps I would take to ensure the classroom and I were ready for the first day of class) with the principal, but her hectic schedule of meetings in preparation for the first day of school prevented any kind of lengthy discussion. At one point, I happened to walk into her office as she was instructing the custodial staff to clear the garbage away from the area surrounding the school. I was relieved to
hear that the garbage was going to be removed, but now I was too focused on what my room would look like to keep thinking about the exterior of the school. My principal then asked one of the vice principals to give me the keys to my room and told me the paper for my walls was all the way down the hall. Then the principal left for an appointment downtown. I didn’t really know what all this meant, but I was determined to budget my time in the next few weeks to familiarize myself with the school policies and set up my room so I could feel sufficiently confident on the first day of school. And if I was not 100% ready, I needed to be okay with that; rather than panic and risk losing control of my room, I needed to focus on being present and proactive in the way I interacted with my students. My “School Preparation Action Plan” coupled with a focus on readiness was a big step away from my paralyzing lack of confidence.

The vice principal walked me to my room, gave me my keys, and said, “Well, this is it. I’ll be leaving in a couple of hours, but don’t hesitate to let me know if you need anything.”

The sight of furniture and toys strewn haphazardly throughout the room coupled with the unfamiliar curriculum texts overwhelmed me. I soon found solace in my detailed “School Preparation Action Plan.” The kids would arrive in less than three weeks, and I had to ensure they found a safe, clean, exciting, and print-rich classroom waiting for them.

A “print-rich” environment means that there are plenty of print materials in the class (such as books, magazines, newspapers, menus, recipe books, and so on), labels on various pieces of furniture, and signs or posters, many of which the children would ultimately help make.
The walls were a drab purple hue with a chipped and coarse surface that showed its age. I looked down at my action plan and saw, “make walls bright and inviting” as one of my tasks to be completed. The thick, humid August heat that filled the air of my classroom must have blocked my memory, because I could not recall anything my principal said about what to do with the walls. I wandered through the building, looking for someone who could provide some direction. Luckily, a veteran kindergarten teacher was just around the corner, putting the final touches on her room with the help of her three daughters. Her walls were bright and cheery, but not from a fresh coat of paint. She used rolls and rolls of fadeless butcher paper and, from what she told me, I needed to do the same. I spent the next few days covering my room with bright yellow, green, blue, red, orange, and purple paper with the assistance of two new co-workers. One was another veteran teacher who was already finished with her room, the other was Ms. Franklin, a 70-year-old teacher’s aide who thankfully was not shy about telling me when I did something wrong. In the end, I had a swollen hand from the constant banging of the staple gun, but my room looked more like a place where a four-year-old would want to play.

AUGUST 23

Beyond the Paper-Covered Walls: Making Room 111 a Conducive Learning Environment

Next on my list was to create a safe room arrangement, one conducive to an active and age-appropriate pre-K day. I enlisted the help of Mark, who not only brought with him years of experience in early childhood education, but also a better sense of spatial relationships than I could ever hope to acquire. We moved wooden furniture (tables, chairs, bookshelves, play ovens, blocks, and
more) and a large alphabet carpet around the room. Despite the 95-degree heat, the extreme humidity, and the lack of air conditioning, we worked until the arrangement was just right. In a pre-K setting, this means:

- Separating the quiet areas such as the Library, Writing, and Science Centers from noisy areas such as Blocks and Dramatic Play Centers;
- Putting messy areas such as sand and water near a water source;
- Providing space so children and adults can walk freely in between and around furniture;
- Making materials accessible to children at eye level; and
- Ensuring that adults can see the children at all times.

August 24

Tables and Relationship-Building

The next day I learned that despite the effort Mark and I invested in the arrangement, I failed to consider another crucial element: the opinion of my teaching assistant, Ms. Morrison. Her friend and colleague, Ms. Souter, came in to relay a message: whatever I did with the room I had to make sure the large kidney bean-shaped table was in the front of the room by the door so that Ms. Morrison could serve the breakfast and help greet the families as the kids entered the room each morning. The news initially frustrated me, particularly when I considered the hours of work and sweat Mark and I had put in the day before, and the fact that Mark would not be able to come back to my school because he was helping other corps members. Yet when I thought more about the specific request, and considered how important it would be for me to develop a strong relationship with Ms. Morrison, I decided that changing the arrangement to suit Ms. Morrison’s request, while requiring more time and energy, would be the best move for my students. In pre-K, being the lead teacher does not mean being the only decision-maker in the classroom. You
certainly have to assert yourself with the students and sometimes make the ultimate decision if you and your assistant disagree. Nevertheless, I needed to develop an open and collaborative relationship with Ms. Morrison so my students and I would benefit from her years of experience.

Ms. Morrison’s priorities prompted me to rethink the rationale behind other choices in my room and, more broadly, the meaning attached to the physical space teachers and students would enter in just a few weeks. The positioning of furniture serves practical functions, the safety and productivity of my students being central. I also needed to consider other messages sent to students and families as they first stepped into and then proceeded to work and play in the room. How would I convey to students and families that this was first and foremost a space for them? I was the leader of the classroom, but this was a place designed to serve my students’ needs and maximize their time in school. I therefore included the following:

- Blank space for student artwork in the Art Area with the title, “Our Works of Art” and individual frames where I would later put the students’ names.
- Additional space, at children’s eye-level where possible, for student work throughout the room.
- A section of the classroom library for “Students’ Favorites,” which would include books the class ultimately decided were their favorites.
- A bin in the library called, “Pre-K 111’s Books” for books the class makes, an idea I learned from a Teach For America alumna teaching kindergarten who often

This space was certainly important for the students and families, but, given that students’ artwork often does not take the form of a two-dimensional drawing or painting of a certain limited size, we later made space for other kinds of art forms: during the fall we created a pumpkin museum with individual small pumpkins the students decorated with paint and other materials. We invited family members, administrators, and other teachers to view the exhibit.
made big books with pieces of construction paper or oaktag. She used shared, guided, interactive, and independent writing to make the books with the students and bound them together with metal book rings. The books covered a wide range of learning objectives including basic concepts of print, letter and word awareness, and, if tied to a particular theme, science, math, or social studies objectives linked to that theme. The books also gave students a sense of pride and ownership of their work knowing that they were authors and, as authors, completed a piece of work that is just as worthy to be in the classroom library as a book by Donald Crews, Bill Martin Jr., or Denise Fleming.

- An inviting author’s chair in which students would sit when presenting their writing (or drawing) to the class.

- A Family Board for information about the instructional focus of that week, invitations for special events in the classroom or school, photographs of family volunteers (for example, reading to the class) with the title, “What’s the Buzz in Pre-K 111?” at the front of the room.

- An envelope at the entrance of the room with a pen and notepad paper for administrators or other teachers to leave notes or other paperwork in order to avoid distractions during the instructional day. At my old school and the schools of my colleagues, other teachers and administrators repeatedly interrupted lessons with non-urgent messages and paperwork. I wanted to send the message that while I am a respectful professional who will address any concerns they have and comply with all administrative requests in a timely manner, my primary function is to serve my students.

My time spent before and after school in my classroom also helped me take advantage of opportunities for productive learning time. I was responsive and diligent when it came to working with other teachers and administrators and preparing my classroom materials during that time so that I could be fully present for my students between 8:25 and 2:55 pm.
Clearly identified space on my desk (a letter tray) for any paperwork I needed to complete or submit in order to stay on top of administrative requests and not waste instructional time

A place on the carpet for each student, marked with masking tape

Supply-kit cubbies—one for each student, filled with basic supplies (such as glue stick, thick pencil, chubby crayon, stickers, and so on), with their names on each supply, the supply kit, and the cubby itself

AUGUST 25

The Teacher’s Desk and Leadership

I could not figure out where to put one piece of furniture—my desk. The teacher’s desk—that wide clunky desk I recalled from my elementary school days as the place at which my teachers sat while we completed our work—was a symbol of the separation between teacher and student. I wanted to take a different approach: whether my students were reading independently on the rug, eating lunch, or at centers, I wanted to be present as an active participant in their learning process. I did not want to give my desk a position of prominence in the room. At the same time, I wanted family members to know that I was fully accessible to them. From talking to other teachers, it seemed as though family members typically associated the teacher’s work with her desk, so a desk far away from the door may suggest that the teacher does not consider visitors a crucial part of her work. Given this perspective and my other efforts to maintain a student-centered room, I decided to situate my desk near the door. I still felt unsure about the implications of this move, but part of being a strong leader, as Mark taught me, is that not everything is going to be perfectly aligned with your broader vision all the time. Often, you have to make a decision and move on instead of belaboring a particular issue. Lingering on
such a decision can potentially undermine the operation of the classroom as a whole. I decided that I needed to be decisive and open to the possibility of changing the arrangement at a later date. Although I still valued the process of intellectual deliberation, as the leader of my classroom, I needed to curb those inclinations and move on.

AUGUST 25

A First Encounter

One day, as I was preparing the room, one of my future students came in with his stepfather. Jakim seemed a bit hesitant, but he eventually came in—his hand tightly clasping that of his stepfather. His eyes widened as he surveyed the brightly colored room, with a wide range of exciting materials just waiting to be explored. Jakim gravitated towards the transportation toy bin in the Blocks Area, carefully selected a red sports car, and rolled it across the floor.

“He loves cars,” his stepfather remarked. I began to ask Jakim about his interest in cars, but he was still a bit too reticent to respond. I remember thinking back to that day in late August several months later when Jakim anxiously entered my room each morning with a wide smile on his face that seemed to proclaim, “I feel excited to be in school because you are here!” My first interactions with many of my students were similar, as were my subsequent reflections on their growth.
Preparing for the First Week of School

As I continued to prepare my room, a second grade teacher came by my room to welcome me. She warned me to get ready for the “Hurricane of Tears,” a.k.a. the first week of teaching pre-K, with many students who have never been to school. Her “weather” advisory made me think about ways to make the transition to school as smooth as possible. I wanted the kids to know that school is fun and exciting, and that coming to school did not mean permanently removing themselves from their home environment. I decided to include opportunities for the students to talk about their families and make artwork for their loved ones. On the flip side, I also wanted to establish some continuity between their work at school and their experiences at home at night and on the weekends. I set up a “Family Lending Library,” which included individual library cards (see sample on page 188), and put together homework project packets including a “Quiet Zone” sign to designate a place in their home for students to read and do projects with their families. As for the tears and potential bathroom accidents, I discussed standard procedures with Ms. Morrison who, with years of valuable experience, was able to provide some helpful tips:

1. Nurture the children while helping them make the necessary adjustment to life away from home. A quick hug and redirection to the focus of the larger group can go a long way.

2. Set boundaries with families. While some children need more support during their transition to school, all students need to be able to redirect their focus to classroom activities.
This second point is especially tricky. Family members who linger make the transition more difficult, both for their own children, and the other children in the class, who see these family members but cannot be with their own. We needed to devise strategies for communicating this to family members sensitively, so that they know we want them to be actively involved in their child’s education, but that in the first few weeks there can be a downside to their participation in the classroom. I responded by providing information about a host of ways they can be involved, both in person and in our “Welcome to School” packet, and by letting them know how they could say goodbye and encourage their children to move on with the day’s activities.

SEPTEMBER 4

Planning for the Big Day

As I moved forward with planning before the start of school, I considered my vision for the class, including the messages I wanted to convey to students and their families through my classroom environment and interactions with them.

These key messages included:
● School is an exciting place where you can make friends, be successful, explore and learn new things, and have fun; and
● You are safe here to play, explore, express yourself, and take risks as learners.

I envisioned a class in which students:
● Followed daily routines and procedures with confidence and ease;
● Were genuinely engaged in lessons and daily explorations, confident in their abilities, curious about their surroundings, and excited to learn.
• Progressed significantly in all developmental domains (cognitive, social/emotional, language, and physical) to the point that they were more than ready for kindergarten. This means that they would be able to:
  • Resolve conflicts with their peers using their words,
  • Listen attentively to their peers and adults,
  • Express themselves verbally in full sentences and with an expanded vocabulary,
  • Comprehend and ask questions about stories and compare/contrast the experiences of characters to their own, and
  • Demonstrate foundational literacy and math skills.

Foundational literacy covers a wide range of skills including print awareness (for example: concepts of print such as print moving from left to right and that the print tells the story, letter and word identification, and different functions of print), listening skills, oral language development, phonological awareness (such as rhyming skills, identifying beginning sounds in words), and emergent writing skills (such as writing their names, basic high frequency words such as the, like, and is, writing for different purposed including during play, and starting to write sentences using high frequency words, their names, and invented spelling). Foundational math skills cover a wide range of skills including one-to-one correspondence, rote counting, addition and subtraction with concrete objects, making patterns, seriating and sorting objects, using math comparative terms such as “more and less”, and identifying numerals, shapes, and colors.

I knew that if I wanted to achieve this vision for my classroom, I had to gear everything I did with and in preparation for my students—starting from day one—toward achieving these long-term goals. This was especially clear to me after all the talks I had with Mark and after my time in the Teach For America intensive summer training institutes, where I learned to view teaching as
leadership, as well as the deepening sense of urgency I felt after observing the other pre-K classroom in Newark the previous spring. In response to all of this, I developed lesson plans for the first few weeks that would reflect this broader vision.

**SEPTEMBER 4**

Crafting an Early Childhood-Friendly Schedule and Approach to Families

Another thing Ms. Morrison and Mark stressed was the importance of factoring my students’ short attention spans into how I approached teaching them. Mark suggested looking at the daily schedule like a series of mountains and valleys—the high points being times when I would require my students to give me more of their attention and the low ones being periods during which students had more freedom to explore and learn on their own. Those “down times” did not, however, mean that I would have minimal interactions with the students. While the students would be away from the circle in centers like Dramatic Play or Art, at meals conversing with their friends, or outside during gross motor time, my knowledge of their strengths, weaknesses, and interests would guide their independent exploration time in a way that fostered their growth. This was certainly not a college classroom. To be honest though, even a lecture on the rise and fall of Rome by my professor Amy Leonard would have been more engaging had we explored the topic with blocks, sand, or playdough.

After I took Mark’s advice and began to break down the day in chunks of time and to define those periods in terms of how I would maximize learning time, the day as a whole seemed more manageable and productive.
For the morning, this meant that in whole group or circle time we would follow our morning routines of breakfast, student sign-in, and independent reading. After the students and I had morning meeting at the rug, they would go either outside or to the cafeteria for gross motor time, and occasionally they would participate in a special art or gym activity outside of the room, depending on the day. I would then lead the class as a whole on a brief tour of the centers, after which the students would be free to choose a center in which to play and explore. A small group of children would meet with me, and then go on to the centers while I moved through the room, recording anecdotal observations and interacting with children to promote their learning.

Gross motor time refers to the period of the day during which students engage in activities that strengthen their gross motor skills (a.k.a. large muscles—arms and legs). In some schools and community-based organizations, this time is spent on some kind of playground. Many public schools in Newark, however, don’t have a playground, but just a cement yard fenced in for recess time. We therefore have to bring portable equipment such as tricycles, balls, and hula hoops outside or in a large open indoor area such as the cafeteria or the auditorium.

In addition to all this time spent preparing for my students, I had to think proactively about how I would approach families. While most of my families already had other siblings in the school, the first day would introduce them to the world and culture of my classroom. I took seriously something Mark told me about working with families to get involved and invested in the early childhood educational setting: think about it—mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, whomever takes care of these young children are entrusting you with their children’s lives. Up until this point, these individuals have been the children’s primary caregivers—charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the child is fed, clothed, and provided with shelter. Now those guardians are allowing you to shape their children’s first experiences with the outside world.
I wanted to prove to the families that the time spent in my classroom would add tremendous value to their children’s life trajectory—that not only would their children be safe, but that each moment spent in my classroom would help their children realize the potential their families saw in them.

**SEPTEMBER 6**

**The First Day of Class (Classroom Setup Before the Students Arrive)**

After several months of intense planning—time spent in my living room designing instructional and management plans, making posters, and sorting donated library books; time spent shopping in Staples, Duane Reade, and “99 Cent Dream” on Newark Avenue in Jersey City, checking off one item after another on my School Preparation Action Plan; and time spent in my school arranging furniture, establishing relationships with colleagues, and organizing materials—the time had come to introduce my students to school. But the morning I woke up to start teaching pre-K, I felt neither ready nor confident. Despite my intense preparation and conversations with Mark and other members of Teach For America Newark’s staff, all of the fears and insecurities I felt in my prior teaching position reemerged. Contrary to the helplessness and hopelessness I felt several months before when I left my prior teaching position, and then when I first heard about teaching pre-K, these negative thoughts did not prevent me from moving forward. I remember walking to the PATH station in Jersey City at 5:50 a.m. with no one else around, thinking to myself, “I’ve got to do this.”

That little pep talk I gave myself proved sufficient. I kept moving and did not stop until I reached my classroom for the first official school day. It was the first of 180 days of school and for each I would arrive at 7 a.m., knowing that I
had to be ready for anything. It wouldn’t be enough to say, “I could have addressed that child’s need, reached out to a student’s family, or responded to my principal’s request for some paperwork, if only I had more time” because extra time in my classroom was something I could control, period. At that point, I still had about 90 minutes before the students arrived. Luckily, I had Mark’s voice in the back of my head to help me focus. He was saying, “You think you’re nervous? What about the children who are leaving their moms, dads, aunts, grandmas, or older siblings for the first time? What about the families who have to trust a complete stranger with their babies? You’re the leader, Sophia! Take charge and don’t let it get to the point when you feel like coming back to my office crying. Your kids deserve more than that.”

Okay, so I’m the leader, and a strong leader doesn’t waste time. A strong leader doesn’t have a panic attack. A strong classroom leader gets her act together before the students arrive because once the children arrive she must focus entirely on them and their needs, not on classroom set-up or preparation of materials. I was nervous on that muggy day in early September, but I had also thought about all of this before I walked into my school. My detailed daily action plan, with sections for each period of the day when the students were not present, reflected this mindset. In fact, I crafted the template as a whole with one simple rule for myself: If I worked on something while the students were present, something that could have been done before or after school or on the weekend, I was, in effect, doing the children a disservice. Similarly, if I felt overwhelmed by something such as setting up materials or completing paperwork, I needed to think critically about how better to manage my time and to work with my teaching assistant. Often, these changes entailed adding a section to my weekly or daily action plans, engaging Ms. Morrison in a discussion about our responsibilities at different points in the day, or ensuring that I had an educational song cued up on the CD player in case I needed to handle an emergency during circle time. Although I entered Teach For America with a strong sense of personal responsibility, Mark challenged me to handle
the multifaceted pressures of being a teacher by developing stronger management skills instead of embracing a martyrdom complex. True, I needed to work constantly for the betterment of my students, but if I wanted to lead them successfully from September to June, and not end up feeling overwhelmed and defeated, I absolutely needed a clear plan and structured mode of execution. An eager but haphazard approach might earn me some compliments from my colleagues for working hard, but if it didn’t translate into positive results for my students, it was useless. Since organization and management were not my strongest skills, cultivating them became a central part of my commitment to closing the achievement gap. Otherwise, I risked leaving the classroom a naïve idealist with good intentions but no real impact.

On the first day of school, this preparation involved making sure my students’ nametags were ready—a rather simple procedure involving string tied by Ms. Morrison, laminated green construction paper frogs, and a black Sharpie marker ready to go in my fanny pack. The cubbies, similarly, had blank labels covered with clear plastic tape where I could write each child’s name. These details are essential for four-year-olds who are just starting to make sense of their larger surroundings with unfamiliar pictures that they would soon learn are letters and words that carry meaning. As their first teacher, I was in the position to facilitate basic print connections or to squander the opportunity to empower my students with a foundational skill.

As I completed what I like to call “Operation Basic Literacy Connection,” I glanced over at the clock and noticed it was now 7:45—leaving me a little under an hour to complete preparations. I also greeted Ms. Morrison who, unlike me, had years of first-day experiences to keep her perfectly at ease. This was, however, our first time introducing students together.
Ms. Morrison and I had only known each other for two weeks, and while she seemed pleased that I put her table in the correct place, she managed to question every decision I made that differed from the decisions of previous teachers with whom she had worked. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that these conversations helped make me a better teacher by prompting me to reflect critically about my plans. Yet in those first couple of months, lingering doubts about my expertise in early childhood education, combined with my desire to develop a strong relationship with Ms. Morrison (and to leverage her years of experience), led me to adopt some instructional practices that were largely ineffective and inappropriate (such as having the entire class practice writing the same letter with pencil and paper the second week of school). The more time I spent in the classroom, the more time I spent discussing with Mark how best to meet the needs of the children, and the more time I spent outside of class reading about child development, the more comfortable I became with asserting my authority in the classroom. Similarly, I felt better equipped with a confident mindset grounded in firsthand insights and background knowledge. I developed a vision of excellence for my students, retained high expectations for my students, and used individualized instruction. Together, these factors would make the children more than ready for kindergarten in all developmental domains. If a past teacher’s lesson plans and daily schedule inhibited the realization of that vision, I could not just go along with it to make my life easier. So, while we were almost all set for day one of school, Ms. Morrison and I still needed to work out the kinks of our relationship in order to maximize our time with the bright young scholars of Pre-K 111.
Although some pesky nerves continued to taunt my still-developing sense of confidence, I was able to stay focused largely because of the time and energy I had invested in the action-plan items I was now completing. I could efficiently forge ahead with the preparations for personalizing the children’s supply kits, as well as arranging circle time materials at the children’s eye level (our illustrated daily schedule and an alphabetized name chart with the first letter of each name written in red). I did not have to question the logic behind these setups because I had already spent a great deal of time crafting a vision and concrete plans that reflected the needs of my students and their families.

SEPTEMBER 6

The First Day of Class (Classroom Setup Before the Students Arrive—Breakfast)

Final item: breakfast set-up. At orientation, my vice principal assured me that some older students would deliver the breakfast to my room around 8:20 a.m., shortly before my students arrived. When I heard this, I imagined the ensuing chaos and confusion as 15 four-year-olds entered my room for the first time while some fifth graders delivered the crate of food that Ms. Morrison would—after returning from her welcoming duties at one of the school’s five entrances—lay out on her large table. I decided this was not the best way to start school each day, not for my students, their families, Ms. Morrison, or me. I responded to the vice principal’s description of the standard breakfast protocol by asking him if I could pick up the breakfast. He said I would have to ask the cafeteria staff, so I took out my action plan for the following day and added “Breakfast setup: investigate possibility of picking up food early.” I discovered that the food is ready around 8:00 a.m. each morning and that the cafeteria
staff (led by Mr. Gregory, whose attentiveness to the needs of my class throughout my tenure I deeply appreciate) could consolidate my class’s food, juice, and milk into one crate to make it easier for me to bring the breakfast to my room in one trip. That meant that by the time my students arrived, breakfast would be ready and Ms. Morrison and I could focus on welcoming children and families and attending to any unexpected occurrences (such as Jafis crying hysterically at the thought of separating from his mother). As I lugged the crate up from the cafeteria to my classroom for the first of nearly 540 times during my tenure at Carter, I was intent on the task at hand: delivering the food to Ms. Morrison as quickly as possible without dropping the cream cheese-stuffed bagel bites. The children were set to arrive in fewer than 20 minutes, and I wanted to be ready to greet them. In the end, it took no more than five minutes to get the food to my classroom. At that time, I could not have imagined the positive impact this one arrangement would ultimately have on my ability to increase my preparedness on a daily basis, as well as give me the time to establish a strong rapport with my students and their families.

In one fluid motion, I set the crate down and grabbed my clipboard. The clipboard held the daily action plan that I had followed since 7 a.m., as well as the daily lesson plan detailing the objectives and activities for the entire day. I reviewed the entire plan, focusing primarily on the top section. It described essential messages I needed to convey and specific actions that needed to take place in order to facilitate a smooth home-to-school transition for the children and families. This was a crucial part of developing a structured and supportive classroom environment conducive to learning. For students who entered my room anxious about leaving their parents and the familiarity of home, I hoped that predictable routines, logical consequences, and varied opportunities for exploration, fun, and accomplishment would pave the way for them to be engaged members of our classroom community. There were details on my plan for everything, from showing family members and children where to put their naptime blankets to notes on how to teach my students the procedure for
transitioning from the breakfast table to the rug for independent reading and morning circle time.

My experience with Jafis for the first few weeks demonstrated both the importance of striking a balance between transitioning students to the structure of school while also supporting them emotionally as they deal with separation anxiety and developing a strong support system with your teaching assistant. That balance eventually proved necessary, but could not on its own address the immediate difficulty of one screaming child running down the hall to be with his mother and a class full of other young children. Ms. Morrison helped calm down Jafis each day while I worked with the rest of the class. Jafis’s mother also worked to ease the transition by having his sister drop him off each day.

Having reviewed and highlighted key sections of my plan, I felt as ready as I’d ever be for the children to arrive. As the bell rang, I could feel my knees weaken, my heart race, and a small part of my brain flirt with the idea of running for the nearest exit. I took a deep breath, quickly reminded myself of the need to transcend my own fears, and smiled. This was it. This was my chance. I had missed my opportunity to have a real impact in the classroom on the front lines in our nation’s fight against educational inequity once before. It wouldn’t happen again. Period.
Welcome to Pre-K 111

“Welcome to Pre-K 111! My name is Ms. Pappas, and I am so excited to meet you.” The students and families seemed to come in a bit faster than I expected, so I could never calm down completely between arrivals, but I managed to buck up and greet each of them. I wanted my students to know that I was not there to speak at them or only to talk with their families, so I made sure to squat down to their eye-level to ask them their names. The details of that day are a bit fuzzy, but I do remember the wide range of emotions revealed through their eyes: from excited to frightened. This was my first glimpse into the children’s uniqueness as individuals. They had been alive for only three or four years, but they each brought a host of experiences, perceptions, concerns, hopes, and interests to our class. Jocelyn stayed close to her father and barely looked at me. Her father had to tell me her name because she was too shy. Najiyah entered smiling, accompanied by three older siblings. She told me her name and its first letter as I wrote it on her cubby. Tears gushed out of Jafis’s eyes and were soon smeared all over his face. He was not about to let me or anyone keep him away from his mother. He clung desperately to her as she motioned to walk out of the door. I allowed her to stay a few minutes while he got settled.

While Ms. Morrison and I maintained an aura of calmness and focused the rest of the class on how to open their breakfast packages independently and use their words to ask a friend for assistance if necessary, Jafis’s mother helped acclimate her young son to school. He didn’t demonstrate progress in preparing his breakfast independently or expressing himself verbally to receive assistance on that day. Yet with constant reinforcement of the routine in following days, encouragement from Ms. Morrison, me, and his mother, and because he saw how the rest of the class was able to follow the routine, Jafis eventually got there within a couple of weeks. Had I allowed Jafis’s difficulties that first day to derail the focus of the rest of the class, or to cause me to lower expectations,
we would not have been able to move forward with the important work of active exploration and learning. Ms. Morrison’s guidance was critical in keeping both the class and me on track. To be frank, when I saw Jafis crying, and saw some of the other children struggling to adapt to pre-K, my first instinct was to rush to open their milk cartons for them to avoid an eruption of tears. Luckily for my students’ developing self-help, social, and oral-language skills, I took Ms. Morrison’s lead. She was nurturing and helpful to the students without coddling them. She taught them how to take responsibility and politely reach out to and respond to others with clear and modeled directions. In doing so, she helped me translate my vision of productive and well-adjusted students into a reality.

As for Jafis, his mother sneaked out toward the end of breakfast and said she would see him later. He cried soon after that, but with some soothing words from Ms. Morrison, Jafis soon calmed down. I saw him peering at the door a few times through the course of that first day, but by the time we gathered for morning group circle time he was fine, at least until the following morning, when we would continue the sometimes painful process of Jafis’s initial transition to school.

As we proceeded to our first morning group circle time, I began to learn more about my students. As a whole, the group responded well to a rhyming song I learned from a former Teach For America teacher. In class, we used the song to teach everyone how to listen attentively on the rug.

The rhyme used straightforward, modeled directions that also reinforced the names of body parts and introduced rhyming words to my students. The students also responded to clear and genuine positive reinforcement that highlighted specific accomplishments. This generated a strong rapport between me and my students; they knew and could trust that I would acknowledge their successes with honest feedback.
A small group of children sat quietly as they adjusted to their new surroundings. Interestingly, most of the children lived in the same neighborhood but had never met each other before. While some had been in daycare with other young children, others were only used to being around their parents and older siblings. It was time for some official introductions.

In subsequent years, I would use another song that became a class favorite and perfect springboard for some solid early literacy lessons. On that first day of my first year in pre-K, however, we just went around the circle and said our names. Responses ranged from Isaiah, who stood up with his head held high and loudly proclaimed, “Hi, my name is Isaiah Wright,” to Jocelyn whose murmur you could barely hear. I was certainly anxious to begin getting a sense of my students’ levels of development so I could start meeting their individual needs with differentiated instruction. My experience in the following weeks and years, however, made it clear that the performance of four-year-olds on these first days of school does not always reflect their actual skill level in one or more developmental domains. A difficult transition from home to school can often cause children who have mastered certain skills to seem weaker in those areas. Jocelyn, for example, could identify more letters than anyone else in the class, but did not demonstrate her knowledge or interest in that area until the third week of school because she was incredibly shy and often cried for her daddy. Once she became more comfortable with her surroundings and with me, she jumped (literally) at the chance to explore letters. It was heartening to see her become so responsive to my efforts to build on that foundation of alphabet knowledge, and to begin learning about words and letter sounds. She showed the greatest level of excitement during center time, small group, and in one-on-one interactions with me. Her ability to engage in the whole group lesson on the rug, however, took longer. In contrast, many times children who had an easier time adjusting to school and who were quite vocal, such as Isaiah, ended up exhibiting weaknesses in other areas, such as print awareness (Isaiah could not hold a book properly), counting, and key social skills including sharing.
materials and listening attentively to peers and adults. Isaiah’s excitement on the rug that first day introduced me to a young boy comfortable in new situations. But if I was going to do my job and adequately prepare him and all my students for kindergarten, I needed to watch and listen to each of them closely, throughout the day, everyday, to understand and to meet their needs in all areas.

**SEPTEMBER 6**

**After the Meet and Greet: Adjusting to a Full Day of School**

All things considered, the rest of the day went pretty smoothly. We had a few criers, as was expected. But with the combination of Ms. Morrison’s years of first-day experience and the lessons I had planned to teach our procedures and to give my new students a chance to express themselves and explore our materials, we were on our way to building a strong classroom community. The classroom tour was a critical part of this journey. First things first: the students needed to practice how to use “walking feet,” “listening ears,” and “inside voices,” especially when traveling as a group. I quickly learned the power of a healthy dose of silliness. I engaged many of my children by demonstrating quite dramatically what would happen if we did not follow those rules. Even the children who were about ready to tune out for a nap were amazed at the sight of an adult falling over herself and onto the floor—all in the name of structure. “Isn’t that what walking feet look like? Can somebody show me? I see Mickey Mouse doing it on the sign, next to the words ‘walking feet,’ but I’m not sure.” I then called on two students to step up and show us the way. “Oh, that is a lot safer! Now, let’s all practice it as we walk around the room.” The students then traveled from the entrance to the Dramatic Play Area where so many of them would, in the coming weeks and months, take on a wide range of
roles, including doctors, grocers, waiters, mommies, and daddies. However, just showing the children the area was not enough. I wanted them to start thinking about how they might actively explore and use the materials. I used a prop to initiate the process.

“Ring, ring... what is that noise? Where is it coming from? Is it the stove? Is it Jafis’s shoe?”

“No, it’s the phone!” the students responded, anxiously.

“Oh, let’s see who it is. Hello, this is Ms. Pappas, how can I help you? Oh, Spongebob, we are busy right now, would you like to leave a message?” I turned to the class with a puzzled look on my face. “Mr. Squarepants wants to tell us something, but we have to move on to the blocks area. How can I let you know what he wants?” The children responded with an equally puzzled look. Isaiah raised his hand. “I see the hand of someone whose name starts with the letter I, yes, Isaiah.”

“Just tell us teacher. I love Spongebob,” said Isaiah.

“Well, I would tell you, but I may forget what he wants. I better write it down instead. What can I use to write it down?” Again, blank stares and, I’m pretty sure, a couple of unexpected tumble weeds making their way through my classroom. I then had a few options before I lost their attention:
1. Just pick up a note pad, solve the problem for them, and move on;
2. Tell them Spongebob will have to call back when they return to Dramatic Play on their own; or
3. Make one last effort to encourage the development of their critical-thinking skills: silliness.
I decided to go with option three.
“Hmm, how about using this apple to write on Sarah’s head? Will this work?” As I picked up a plastic apple and tried to write a message on Sarah’s head, I began to see my students, even the ones who had been spent a good portion of the morning in tears, perk up. I decided to continue trying to transcribe Mr. Squarepants’ message until I had riled up an overwhelming majority of my class, even at the risk of sacrificing our “inside voices” rules, just for a few minutes. I wanted to generate curiosity and a sense of collective excitement while getting them to think on their own. Slowly but surely the class erupted in a chorus of “Nooooos” or “That’s not right.”

“Well then what should I use? I feel confused and sad. I want to write the message, but I don’t know what to use.” (A little modeling of I-statements with feelings words also helped. My class would soon learn that in Pre-K 111, it is okay to be sad, angry, confused, and frustrated, as long as you express those emotions with certain words, not fists, kicks, or tantrums.) At this point, the students all started pointing to a box of markers and crayons on the table.

“Oh, what are these? Let me see.” As I picked up a crayon and started writing, they followed my every move and breathed a sigh of relief. Ms. Pappas had solved her problem, they had helped, and we could move on. But they weren’t just going on to blocks, art, sand, and the rest of the areas as passive observers. They had started their journey as active explorers, thinkers, and learners.
My First Observation—Anticipating Mark’s Arrival

I remember feeling anxious when I signed up to have Mark do his first observation of my class. He had not seen me teach since my first unsuccessful attempt the year before. Over the past year, he invested countless hours supporting me with concrete strategies for my classroom, feedback on my vision and plans for becoming a better teacher, and with tough love intended to empower me with the confident and mission-driven mindset I would need to persevere. I knew he would still be there to help me grow as an educator and not to judge me, but I also did not want to disappoint him. I feared that anything less than excellence would make him feel that all those phone calls, emails, and in-person meetings were a waste of his time—or worse, a sign that I was squandering the unique second chance I was given to help improve the educational lives and futures of my students. I signed up for one of the earliest observation times, partly to circumvent an extended period of nervousness and partly to force myself to move beyond those insecurities as soon as possible so that I could more fully focus on my students’ progress.

As always, I went over my plans for the day in the 90-minute period I reserved before students entered in the morning. This time, I needed additional time because my worries about Mark’s visit inhibited my ability to concentrate. I must have read over the open-ended question I would use to start the day four or five times before feeling comfortable moving on to the next section of my plan. “How did you come to school today? How did you come to school today? How did you come to school today? How did you come to school today?” In college, I studied and understood complex political and historical phenomena, but because of my anxiety I was having trouble remembering this simple
question. That experience further shaped my understanding of what it takes to lead. It wasn’t enough and it will never be enough to design plans and know content. Leaders need the confidence and courage to execute those plans regardless of who is present.

Luckily, for my nerves and my students, the bell rang soon after. By this time in my first year, we had already settled into our morning routine. The structure and predictability helped not only my students, but also helped me get over the hump of morning jitters to ease into the school day. Jafis was also significantly calmer, particularly after we discovered the benefit of having his older sister, not his mother, drop him off in the morning.

The students came in, greeted me, and placed their belongings in their cubbies. “Sarah! I feel excited. How do you feel today?”

“Fine” said Sarah.

“Who feels fine? Does Dora feel fine? Do I feel fine? No, I feel excited, so who feels fine?”

“I do” said Sarah.

“Oh, then what would you say?”

“I feel fine” said Sarah.

“Oh, that makes sense. So what do we do next?” Sarah then found her cubby with her name on it, with the first letter in red and the rest in black. “How do you know that is your name, Sarah?” Sarah pointed to the S, made the /s/ sound and moved her arm like a snake. “Oh, /s/, Sarah, like the /s/ in “snake”! Give yourself a kiss on the brain.”
I used these routines to teach and reinforce a number of key language and social skills. In this two-minute interaction alone, Sarah and I worked on listening, oral-language development, letter-sound connections, and print awareness, not to mention how this interaction helped develop her ability to adjust to the routines of the school day. I also made sure the expression on my face and the tone of my voice conveyed my genuine excitement to see each student every morning. I learned this from my mother, who consistently greets her loved ones each time they come to the door as if she hasn’t seen them in years. I wanted my students to know how crucial they each were to the functioning of our classroom on a daily basis. It was not okay for them to miss out on the fun and learning, and their absence would make Ms. Morrison, their classmates, and me sad because their presence added so much to the room.

I went on to converse with my students as they ate their breakfast and looked for letters in the newspaper. By this time, the students had learned that if they want to open their cereal or any other food container, they either do it individually or use their words to ask a friend. Some of the students, especially the shyer ones, still needed me to facilitate the process of reaching out to a peer. I saw Liana sitting at the end of our *Cat in the Hat* table, staring hopelessly at her unopened milk carton. She had three friends around her, but chose to peel off the “table” label and bite her lower lip in frustration instead of trying again or asking them for help.

“Liana, that milk looks delicious, and the calcium will make your bones strong. Do you need some help?” Liana remained quiet, but I could see her eyes begin to well up with tears. “Hmm, I wonder if there is anyone here who could help you. I had some trouble putting away all the cars in the Blocks Center yesterday and one of my friends helped me. Is there anyone here who could be a kind friend to Liana?” Jocelyn stepped up. She was still shy but demonstrated her willingness to assist by extending her hand towards the milk container.
“Wow, look at that! Jocelyn wants to help. Jocelyn, why don’t you tell Liana that you want to help so she knows for sure.”

“I’ll help you with your milk” said Jocelyn. Liana slowly turned her milk over to Jocelyn without saying a word.

“Thank you, Liana, for letting Jocelyn help you. Now what could you say to Jocelyn to let her know you appreciate what she’s doing, that you’re glad she is helping you?”

Liana said “Thank you” to Jocelyn.

“Excellent work, girls! Thank you for being such good friends to each other!”

Milk opened…mission accomplished.

S E P T E M B E R  2 6

My First Observation—After Mark Arrived

As I directed my students to the daily sign-in book and then the rug for independent reading time, the loudspeaker buzzed and I felt as though the milk from my own cereal were curdling in the pit of my stomach.

“Ms. Pappas, Mr. Williams is here to see you.”

“Okay, you can send him down, thank you,” I replied, making a conscious effort to control the shakiness in my voice. By now, I had a strong professional relationship and friendship with Mark, but I still dreaded his arrival.
He came in, greeted Ms. Morrison and me, and then settled into a chair, ready to see how I was doing in my second shot at teaching. Soon after Mark arrived, I transitioned the class to morning meeting with the “Read, Read, Read, a Book” song Ms. Morrison had taught me. We went through the different parts of our morning meetings, some of which were prescribed by my scripted curriculum, and others that I had incorporated to maximize the learning time with my students. The greeting song went well, but as we moved on to a discussion about their responses to the sharing question, I could tell that not all the students were focused. Jafis started by extending his legs and then proceeded to roll around, tap his neighbor, and talk on his own. Abdul turned his body around and began reading a book, while Shakira played with her shoelaces.

I struggled to regain the children’s attention, and felt discouraged by our inability to get to rhyme time after the morning message. I then glanced over at the clock and noticed it was time for gym. Mark said he would wait in the class for me to return. As we traveled through the halls and up the stairs, I wondered what he would say. The pessimistic perfectionist in me felt disappointed in myself and anxious to improve. I came back to Mark smiling and looking around the room.

“So, how do you think you did?”

“Okay, not as well as we have done on other days, the kids just weren’t with me, and I had to spend too much time addressing individual behavior problems. I didn’t even use our behavior chart because I was so disappointed….”

As I began to rattle off everything that went wrong, Mark listened patiently, but then responded with a comment I did not expect:

“Well, okay, but I saw something different. I want you to step back and think about the whole class, who was with you, when they were with you, and when
you lost some students’ attention. The truth is that you were engaged with all but a few students. How can you build on their enthusiasm to spark the interest of other students? In terms of losing students, break down each part of your circle time and figure out how you might be able to prevent the misbehavior. Remember, they are young kids who often need to release energy. How can you make sure the pacing, transitions, and mini-lessons in your morning meeting reflect this need? You are on the right track. You just need to think critically about what is working and use those strengths to address other weak points.”

“Whew, yes, that sounds practical and manageable. I’m also really tired.”

“Well, remember, this is a process. Do not stay up all night to try to make all these changes. Commit to the process of making improvements over time. Otherwise, you will get to the point where it all seems overwhelming and impossible. And that won’t help anyone, not your students and not you.”

Mark was right. This was not finals time in college. I was not pouring all of my ideas into a 20-page paper I would hand into a professor in a week. I needed to adjust my mindset and organizational habits to the task at hand. I would start with my positive approach to my students when I picked them up at gym, but lay out a plan for more substantive change that would span the weeks and months ahead that would include my students, their families, Ms. Morrison, and me.

Within a few weeks, my morning meeting reflected the changes Mark and I discussed. We were on the circle for about 20 minutes, but to the kids it was more like five mini-lessons with plenty of upbeat and engaging transitions that included everything from singing and movement to common phrases I would use to segue into the next activity. I continued to use the song “Read, Read, Read a Book,” but added a countdown and whole-group ticket system that
rewarded the class for being ready to go when I reached zero and finished saying the “hands and feet are folded” rhyme. I kept my students thinking at all times by using the first letter or sound in their names to call on them, rather than just their names. I anticipated misbehavior by engaging the class in movement activities that often reinforced emergent math or literacy skills or moved students around to different spots on the rug. Lastly, I balanced firmness with frequent injections of silliness. Luckily, the students were there to help me when I got confused and tried to write on their shoes and heads instead of the whiteboard. They were also quite fond of our classroom puppets. Susan the Squirrel and Lucy the Lion made frequent appearances and were great at teaching the students about conflict resolution. For some reason Susan and Lucy frequently had problems sharing and keeping their hands to themselves, but the pre-K 111 problem-solvers were happy to help.

If we did not have gym or another special activity planned for the day, we would move on to gross motor play after morning meeting. We typically started with a ten-minute whole-group lesson that incorporated movement and infused skills from other developmental domains (such as playing Simon Says with a designated number of movements, or playing “Goin’ on a Bear Hunt” while using positional words such as “under,” “over,” and “around”). After that came 30 minutes of free-choice time in which the children had a wide range of options (such as throwing, catching, rolling, and bouncing balls, jumping rope or making shapes and letters with ropes, as well as playing games with alphabet or numeral mats). Afterwards, students would come back to class, I would give them a brief tour of the learning labs during which time they had to give me their full attention, refrain from touching the materials without my permission, and raise their hands if they had questions. They would soon have the chance to explore these areas on their own, but if I did not outline clear behavioral expectations during the tour and consistently enforce these rules, the students would not have an understanding of how they could use the materials in ways that were both safe and conducive to learning. Then we
would gather back on the rug and the children would choose the labs they wanted to explore. Those students in small group with me would choose first and then come back to the rug. The rest of them would go to the labs of their choice.

We had come a long way, and it was still only the fall.

JUNE 15

No Longer a Novice

I learned a great deal about my students and myself as a classroom leader that first year of teaching. Although I started the year feeling insecure about my ability to facilitate the students’ growth, my commitment to constant reflection and improvement ultimately enabled me to transcend those fears and serve the best interests of my kids. The following chapters, based on blog entries from my third year in the classroom, delve deeper into how I approached assessment, planning, and instruction. The entries in this section that outline my first year teaching, including the invaluable contributions of Mark and the other members of the Teach For America regional staff, laid the groundwork for developing these systems and methods of teaching, as well as the success I had implementing them.
Part Two

Growth and Goals: Insights from the Classroom and Beyond
Introduction

Debates on the appropriate focus of early childhood education, in my opinion, often suffer from a false choice between an emphasis on either social/emotional or language/literacy and cognitive skills. Advocates of pre-K programs that focus on social/emotional readiness often begin the conversation with reference to the whole child. Yet their argument frequently becomes an endorsement of programs that concentrate more heavily on social/emotional development than growth in the other three domains of child development, and then go on to condemn more “academic-based” programs, like “drill kill” approaches. Their complaint is that, while producing some short-term results, such programs can negatively impact children and leave them further behind in the long run. In the whole-child model, teachers respect the freedom of students to choose the play area, “center,” or “learning lab” of their choice by guiding their learning without requiring them to produce specific outcomes at any given time. Advocates on the other side of the spectrum purport to offer cultivation of social and academic skills, but stress the need to lay a solid foundation of early literacy and math skills through more structured and objective-driven lessons. They criticize the more play-based, whole-child camp for relinquishing too much control over the direction and outcome of student learning, wasting a unique opportunity to level the playing field before students enter kindergarten.

As a pre-K teacher, student in a P–3 certification program, and workshop facilitator for other early childhood teachers, I have talked to individuals on both sides. We all seem to want what is best for kids, but in the midst of attacking one straw man after another, we end up committing a greater act of injustice against children: allowing inflexible, dogmatic views to prevent the students from a more practical approach that can prepare them for kindergarten in all areas of development.