As an education minor at Cornell, I have gained insight into the world of education and the factors that differentiate the most successful schools from the ones that are failing their students. The following publication is meant to address two specific insights that I will carry with me as I begin my career as an educator.

Insight #1: Teachers must immerse themselves in communities that differ from their own in order to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy that will resonate with a diverse student body.

I have wanted to be a teacher since the first time I stepped foot in a classroom. Thus, when I started my freshman year at Cornell, I immediately enrolled in education courses with the goal of learning how to become a great teacher. What I did not realize as a freshman was that teacher education and training is far more than just sitting in a classroom and learning about different teaching methods and classroom management skills.

Gloria Ladson-Billings wrote an article in which she analyzed several problematic aspects of teacher education. One problem she identified was the tendency for teachers to blame “culture” for problematic behavior or poor academic performance from students of color (2006). She posited that “most members of the dominant society rarely acknowledge themselves as cultural beings. They have no reason to. Culture is that exotic element possessed by ‘minorities.’ … It is also the convenient explanation for why some students cannot achieve success in the classroom” (2006). Ladson-Billings suggests that members of the dominant society believe they are not part of a culture, and so they use this ambiguous term as a reason for why they cannot connect with students from a different “culture” in the classroom. I think that these teachers do not view themselves as “cultural beings” because their perception of the meaning behind the word “culture” is skewed. Culture is not necessarily something extravagant or festive. As the graduate teaching assistant in my class on Multicultural Issues in Education put it, culture is “that which we do all the time – the grammar of our living.”
Because culture is so ordinary, and thus so present in our everyday lives, it is crucial for teachers to acknowledge culture as a lens through which we teach and learn, as opposed to an excuse for poor behavior or an inability to connect with students. This type of pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning is referred to by Ladson-Billings as Culturally Responsive Teaching (1994). But how can teachers, particularly teachers from a “dominant society,” be better equipped to practice culturally responsive teaching? From my experience, it requires more than just passively learning about different cultures through textbooks and lectures. Rather, teachers must immerse themselves in communities that differ from their own in order to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy that will resonate with a diverse student body.

I come from a homogenous community. I rarely had the opportunity to interact with individuals from different racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. The new community that I created for myself at Cornell wasn’t much different. As an intimidated freshman at a new school, I chose to surround myself with people who resembled the community I was a part of at home. However, after spending a summer as a teaching fellow for an organization called Breakthrough Collaborative, I recognized the importance of immersing myself in more diverse environments if I wanted to become a strong teacher, and one that is culturally responsive and attuned to a culturally diverse student body.

Breakthrough is an organization that works with high achieving, but underserved middle school students to give them the resources and support necessary to attend a college preparatory high school, and ultimately, college. One of the many resources Breakthrough provides is a 5-week summer program, where the students attend classes in preparation for the upcoming school year. These classes are taught by Breakthrough teaching fellows – undergraduate college students, passionate about education. Before classes begin, teaching fellows undergo four weeks of rigorous training. During this period, we were taught the Breakthrough teaching model, classroom management skills, and techniques of teaching that would help us in our work with students over the summer. In addition to learning these teaching methods, our training involved building a community amongst the teaching fellows.

One community-building activity we participated in was a diversity workshop. There were several blank posters placed around the room with identifiers listed on top, some of the key ones...
being gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religion, among others. We were each given a stack of post-its, and we had to write a word that described us for that particular identifier. At the end, each post-it was put on display, and we silently walked around to see how the other teaching fellows identified themselves. Walking around that room and openly confronting the wide range of identities that existed within it was a pivotal experience for me. I had never been a part of a diverse community and had never confronted diversity so honestly until that moment. As the summer progressed, I learned so much from my interactions with the teaching fellows. We became so close that we even spent time together outside of Breakthrough, which gave me the opportunity to learn even more about these individuals who seemed so different from me. My learning experiences that summer changed my life. While learning about classroom management and lesson planning helped prepare me to teach, I learned the most through my interactions with the other teaching fellows. I recognized that in order to become a more culturally responsive teacher, I needed to spend time with people who are different from me, so that I could learn from their diverse perspectives and experiences.

My aspiration to become a more culturally responsive teacher led me to enroll in the Intergroup Dialogue Project, a class comprised of a small group of around 10 students and two student facilitators. The class met once a week for three hours to discuss issues related to a specific identifier assigned to that group. The topic of my group was socioeconomic status (SES). Intergroup Dialogue was a unique learning experience because, unlike most education courses, the curriculum did not involve teaching specific theories of education. Rather, the goal was to learn and develop new understandings through listening to the experiences of others. Throughout the semester, I participated in various activities and dialogues that gave me insight into the experiences and feelings of my classmates who came from a SES different from my own. One such activity was the “privilege walk,” which started off with each student standing in a line in the middle of the classroom. The facilitators of the dialogue would then ask students to take either a step forward if they had experienced a particular privilege, or a step backwards if they had experienced a certain burden. Thus, by the end of the activity, students towards the front of the room were designated “more privileged”, and those towards the back of the room, “less privileged.” A follow-up to the privilege walk was the “fishbowl” activity. This exercise involved dividing the class into two groups, one a target group, the other an agent group, based on who was defined as more or less
privileged after the privilege walk. Each group then had a chance to speak openly about socioeconomic disparities while the other group actively listened. Through these activities, I was forced and enabled to physically confront the privileges I possess. While I learned more about myself from these activities, I was also afforded the opportunity to actively listen to the experiences of others.

Throughout the course of the semester we also read several articles regarding SES and identity. One such article was “The Complexity of Identity: Who Am I?” by Beverly Tatum (2000). In her article Tatum noted, “dominant groups generally do not like to be reminded of the existence of inequality … The truth is that dominants do not really know what the experiences of the subordinates is” (2000). Through my experiences in Intergroup Dialogue and in Breakthrough, I have strived to defy Tatum’s assertion. Although it is true that I will never sincerely know the experiences of a different community, engaging with people from those communities has helped me to try to understand their experiences. The new understandings I have gained from Intergroup Dialogue and from Breakthrough will inform a culturally responsive pedagogy that I hope to apply when I become a teacher.

To conclude my minor in education, I am currently taking the course, Multicultural Issues in Education. Throughout the semester, we have learned about various minority groups and the challenges they face in the world of education. While this class has been eye-opening in many ways, I learned the most about the experiences of these minority groups through our final project. This project involved entering spaces and engaging with people who are part of a different group than my own. The description of the assignment read, “In a humble and respectful way, go to the other side of the fence, engage different people and immerse yourself in a new context. You should stretch and resist the temptation to seek comfortableness.” As a white student, and future teacher, I wanted to immerse myself in non-white communities. Through this assignment, I was able to experience events that were held for non-white groups, and to gain a better understanding of the culture, values, and experiences of these groups. I attended a Black History Month event at the Southside Community Center in downtown Ithaca, a Community Town Hall held by the Asian Pacific Island American (APIA) students at Cornell, and a Latin Food Celebration at the Latino Living Center. Although these events represent only brief moments in my time at Cornell, introducing myself to these communities gave me more insight than I would gain by just reading
My time at Cornell has granted me various opportunities to grow as a teacher. While my time in the classroom, learning about various educational theories and pedagogies, has helped me to develop the foundation to become a strong teacher, my experiences outside of the classroom, engaging with diverse communities, has made me better equipped to become a culturally responsive teacher. But why does culturally responsive teaching even matter in the first place?

It matters because our nation is in dire need of education reform. White students are consistently outperforming students of color, a concept commonly referred to as the achievement gap. One way to try to ensure the academic success of students of color is through culturally responsive teaching. This model for education reform could increase academic performance, especially in urban schools, because students can better relate to the material being taught, and are not forced to choose between their education and their backgrounds. However, one culturally responsive teacher in a school can only go so far.

**Insight #2: The most effective schools actively seek to establish a connection between the students and the school’s well-defined culture.**

To ensure that all students feel like they can relate to their school, teachers and administrators should emphasize a well-defined school culture. As noted above, the graduate teaching assistant in one of my education classes defined “culture” as “that which we do all the time – the grammar of our living.” Although we tend to think of culture as belonging to a specific group of people, culture can also pertain to the group of people that exist within a school. Thus, each school has its own unique culture. As defined by the Glossary of Education Reform, “school culture generally refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions” (2013). From my experience, the most effective schools actively seek to establish a connection between the
students and the school’s well-defined culture. In other words, students are more excited to come to school, more eager to learn, and more academically motivated when they feel like they connect with the school’s culture.

The first time I recognized the power of a well-defined school culture was while working with Breakthrough. Breakthrough is an ideal environment to examine the impact of school culture on effectiveness because getting students excited to come to school in the summer, and instilling in them an eagerness to learn and a drive towards academic success while their friends are out of school for two months, is no easy task. When people hear the word summer school, they typically envision students who failed a course during the school year and are being forced to take it again over the summer. It may even be viewed as a type of punishment for these students. At Breakthrough, students were excited to come to school in the summer, an attitude fueled by the culture of the program.

The Breakthrough culture manifested itself in several ways, one of which was Breakthrough’s set of “core values” that each student and teacher were responsible for upholding. Each week at an all school meeting, students and teachers would give “core values kudos” to each other, identifying a time when they saw a classmate upholding one of these values. While the kudos held students accountable for their behavior and gave them a sense of pride through public praise from their teachers and peers, the core values themselves united us as a group.

The Breakthrough culture was also expressed through the chants and cheers that filled the cafeteria during lunch. Students and teachers cheering side by side for the group that they are both a part of instilled a sense of pride in everyone that participated. The cheers reminded students that at Breakthrough, school isn’t just defined by work and grades. It is a place where scholars come together to cheer each other on and support one another.

Another aspect of the Breakthrough culture was all-school events, which took place every Friday. From diversity day, to an open mic event, to Olympics, all-school events gave students a chance to showcase their talents, share personal experiences, and form relationships with their peers. These events reinforced a sense of community. Students and teachers got to know one another outside of the classroom, and in a very personal way. When Breakthrough students united as a school each Friday, they developed a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves.
Reflecting back on my time at Breakthrough, I wonder if the program would have been as effective if the Breakthrough culture was not so clearly emphasized. Would students have been as eager to come to school during the summer without the core values, the cheers, and the all-school activities? I think Breakthrough’s culture, and all of the ways in which it was manifested, established a sense of community that made students want to come each day. Breakthrough students and teachers supported one another in the way that a family would. It was a safe haven, a place where students felt comfortable enough to explore their own ideas, but would always have someone, a teacher or a friend, to return to and ask for help when they needed it. This sense of community would not have existed without a clearly defined culture.

With graduation on the horizon, I often find myself reflecting on all of the amazing opportunities Cornell has afforded me. Many of these experiences led to the insights that I highlighted in this paper. Now that I have reflected on what these insights mean and which experiences led to their formation, I must think about the future, and how I will apply the knowledge I have gained.

For one, I will continue to embrace opportunities to enter spaces occupied by diverse communities so that I can continue to grow into a more culturally responsive teacher. I plan to follow Ladson-Billing’s suggestion to interact with students in non-school settings such as “community and neighborhood centers, clubs, teams, and after-school activities” (2006). I am committed to learning about the backgrounds of my students so that I can use this information to help them connect with the material I teach in class. But how can this be accomplished in practice? Duncan-Andrade and Morrell describe how they suggest connecting classroom content to the lives of students of color living in an urban environment (2008). The authors gave the example of teaching a high school English class. In their class, they did not replace classic novels. In fact, they thought it was important for urban schools to teach this type of literature to students so that they could develop the skills to understand and write in standard English once they reached higher education. However, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell suggested teaching these novels in a way that urban students could relate to. They would focus on the characters portrayed as “cultural others” in the texts, thereby making connections to the everyday experiences of urban students, even in literature from other times and places (2008). I think this is a clear example of culturally relevant teaching, as it does not replace a standard English curriculum, but is designed to connect the
required texts to students’ everyday lives so that they could find meaning using their own personal experiences. As a teacher, I hope to be able to connect my students’ lives to the material I teach in class using Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s class as an example. However, because I come from a background different from that of most urban students, it is first important for me to try to gain insight into the experiences of my students.

In terms of school culture, I would also like to establish a connection between the material I teach in class and the culture of the school. I want to remind my students every day of the community that exists for them at school. This can be accomplished even through small gestures. In one of my classes in high school, my teacher had a unique protocol for when a student gave an answer that provided more information than was required, such as providing an explanation so that the class could learn from the response. When a student provided this type of answer, the teacher asked the entire class to praise this student through a short cheer that the class would engage in all together. While this little cheer seemed like a small, meaningless gesture, it showed students that we all support one another and are proud of each others’ successes. I hope that I can create this type of supportive community in my classroom.

Most importantly, though, I have realized that although my time as an undergraduate is ending and my career as an educator is about to begin, I will forever be a student and a life-long learner. I will always strive to lean into discomfort so that I can grow as a teacher, and develop new insights based on the many experiences I will have in the world of education.
References


