

Teaching as a Profession

One major insight I’ve learned through the education minor is that teaching is hard. American culture tends to hugely undervalue the work that teachers do. Several of the classes I took to complete the education minor were focused more on pedagogy rather than educational theory or the sociology of education. These classes were invaluable to me as I become a Teach For America corps member next year.

I have learned that teaching is a profession that not only is very labor intensive, but often underappreciated. Teachers are compensated only a fraction of what others with their same level of education are compensated. I think this is a major problem because it draws highly educated, motivated, and talented young people away from teaching as a profession because there are many more higher paying jobs to be had. Teaching as a profession is incredibly challenging and yet, not many people acknowledge that.

Through the different education classes I’ve taken, I’ve learned that there are so many different considerations and pressures as a teacher. Teachers now need to align their curriculums with the national Common Core. While having high standards for students is undoubtedly a good thing, how to go about establishing those standards leaves room for debate. More often than not, idealist party values unfortunately dictate the national debate about educational reform rather than pragmatic solutions. I think having high standards for all students is crucial and hopefully I can build high standards into my curriculum for next year.

The classes in the education minor gave me tools that will help me next year as a first year teacher. I was able to create actual lesson plans and actual unit plans. I was able to create different assessments. Teaching can be a daunting task and I am certainly anxious for
my first day of school as a teacher in the fall, but I now have tools that make it less intimidating.

I'm glad I was able to take classes that focus more heavily on pedagogy that gave me the tools to begin my teaching career.
Educational Inequality in Open Access Institutions

I am currently writing a senior thesis in sociology on persisting educational inequality in community colleges. My interest in education stemmed from sociology and education classes and I wanted to pursue a topic I had not learned too much about: higher education. Education and sociology classes spend a lot of time on education in K-12, but little time covering higher education. A few of my sociology classes with a focus on education have touched on this topic, but I was interested to learn more so I decided to use higher education as a starting point for my thesis. I chose community colleges because they are a sector of higher education that I truly did not know much about.

While researching and writing my paper, I was surprised to find out the extent to which educational inequality persists in community colleges. Community colleges are open access institutions and serve many different missions. The mission that I was most interested in was that of preparing students to transfer to four-year institutions. I found many students enter community college with the aspiration to earn a bachelor’s degree but relatively few actually transfer. Those that do transfer seem to be students that were already academically prepared for a four-year institution upon graduating high school, but attended community college for any number of reasons.

I was surprised to learn that while community colleges are open to all students educational inequalities still persist. More and more students are starting their educational careers at community as more and more students attend college overall and as the cost of tuition goes up for nearly all institutions; community college is a financially prudent solution to higher education. And yet, community college can become a place where students burn out, drop out with some debt before completing an associates degree or do not meet their aspiration to transfer to a four-year institution.
Community colleges serve a fantastic purpose and provide higher education at an affordable cost. In many cases they do create a gateway to a four-year institution for students. However, there are still many students that do not meet their goals in community college and these students are frequently the ones that were already less advantaged. There is no one solution to fix any aspect of education, including community colleges. The first step is recognizing that there is a problem and that is something I was surprised to discover for myself this year.
Early Childhood Education

As important as K-12 education and even higher education is, the first introduction children have to education whether in pre-K, nursery school, daycare, or even at home; is so important to later academic success. Education starts in the home with parents speaking to their children and the different influences in the home, whether that be television, radio, books, movies or other sources of stimulation. We’re all very aware of the achievement gap along economic lines, but I was surprised to learn how early that gap is formed.

Children of low-income parents hear drastically fewer words than their affluent counterparts by the time they get to school. This puts lower-income students at a disadvantage to their peers. I never realized how early the achievement gap starts and how big of an impact something as seemingly innocuous as speaking to your child can have. While these research findings are well-known amongst academics, this issue of discrepancies in literacy still plagues students and their families. Programs like the Family Reading Partnership encourage all parents to read to their children as often as possible. This exposes children to new words and promotes literacy from an early age.

Early childhood education has been on the national conscious since President Obama’s proposal to Congress to provide high quality pre-k for all children. This has brought the importance of early childhood education to the forefront of population discussion of education. While it is undeniable that it would be fantastic if all children had access to high quality pre-k, there is already a gap between affluent and low-income students when they get to pre-k. Addressing this initial and later widening gap is crucial to closing the large achievement gap seen in high school graduation rates and degree attainment. Early literacy initiatives like those mentioned above will hopefully prepare young children for school and put them on the same level as their advantaged peers.