In my time here at Cornell, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the education I have received up until this point, and learn more about the policies that have shaped it. From New York State’s obsession with standardized testing as proof of learning, to an understanding of why states have felt such a need to opt in to Common Core teaching standards, and the effects of the implementation of No Child Left Behind, I have learned a great deal in a short amount of time. But through experiential learning, I’ve come to the understanding that students of color do best in classrooms where culturally relevant pedagogy is prioritized. I have also come to note the differences between impact and intentions for educational policy initiatives. And lastly, I have reaffirmed the notion that the achievement gap between white students and students of color exists due to structural factors.

My experience in the Art of Teaching class allowed me to spend one day a week at the Ithaca YMCA working with the afterschool program for elementary aged students. Although I went on Fridays, which were always structured differently than the other days due to the impending weekend, the program seemed to have the same quintessential structure as any after-school child care would have. They focused on homework, then provided a snack, then let them break off into activities being done by the staff members present for that specific day. But what I noticed about Fridays in particular was that pool time was a mainstay of their extracurricular activities. For children who did not already know how to swim, their parents could sign them up for lessons that would take place at the same time with a small additional fee. Their parents had the means to give them a structured environment where they could learn important life skills, and get help with homework. For many low-income students of color, this is not possible.

For many low-income students of color, their time spent outside of school cannot be
used as their own. For some that means taking care of younger siblings while their parents work, or holding a part-time job to help with household bills. For some of these students lacking in available time after school out of economic necessity, any extra help they might have needed with a lesson from class, will have to wait until they potentially see it repeated during remedial summer school classes. The time spent between formal school instruction during the summer months is pivotal to the reaffirmation of the lessons and material taught throughout the school year. But if you are a student who comes from a family that is unable to pay for any kind of summer program that does more than have a student watch television, then those lessons are harder to examine and create a solid foundation from.

Some nonprofit organizations focus on providing students with resources to review their knowledge and skills, Practice Makes Perfect, for example, started by a Cornell alumnus, specifically aims to lessen the summer learning gap by providing students a free program that helps to review specific concepts already taught, and help other students get prepared for the work that will come about next year. These programs aimed at assisting low income communities in providing extra resources outside of schools help to lessen the achievement gap but there is still more work to be done.

This achievement gap between students of color and white students begins at the crux of socioeconomic status, but is also exacerbated by policies that take top-down approaches, often concerned with equal inputs, rather than equal outcomes. For example, there was a recent announcement that Harvard University’s Law School will consider GRE exam scores for their next incoming class of applicants on a provisional basis. The current standardized LSAT exam for entrance to law school is one of the only standardized tests used for graduate school applications that does not focus on material that might have been covered in school lessons. Much like the SAT¹, the test is seen as one of the more polarizing ones, as the test is rooted in determining whether you can learn to take a test, rather than having the knowledge and

¹ https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/09/03/sat-scores-drop-and-racial-gaps-remain-large
reasoning skills necessary in order to pursue a career in law. This then results in a discrepancy between students who had the opportunity to take a preparatory class and those who were unable to afford one. This inevitably skews the population of students at the top law schools as those with more means can attain better scores. Policy shifts like this one, can change the dynamics of schools, helping to create the actual diversity that schools talk about. Implementing a standardized exam is always seen as a way to equalize the inputs, so all students are compared with an equalizing factor, but in all actuality the inputs in this case and many others like it are not actually equal and thus cannot possibly produce equal outcomes.

School districts that are often overwhelmed by the large amount of students within them, often forget that with having underperforming schools, their potential for receiving more money than a school applying for grants to help cover resources is low to nonexistent. I recently met a young man who had joined the U.S Army a year ago. Inevitably, the question of what motivated his decision to join came up, and he told me that he had to in order to be able to afford a higher education. As he worked to help support his family, without a bachelor’s degree, he would never make enough to be able to afford college subsidized by financial aid, but did not have grades or a low enough poverty level to receive a full scholarship. When I mentioned programs like the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) or the POSSE Foundation scholarship, he said he had never heard of those alternatives before. Now scheduled for deployment at the end of the year, he now has to endanger his own life and the future welfare of his family oversees, because he lacked the access to information about opportunities he could have had. One crucial step in helping to alleviate the achievement gap is to provide resources and create opportunities for students of color as we get them ourselves.

Other policies enacted from the top down like the No Child Left Behind Act signed by President George W. Bush, often hinder the actual performance of teachers for students. In one instance of volunteering at my former elementary school, I spent some time listening to a few teachers complain about how in practice, the policy was only hurting one student. The student
was a fifth grader reading at a second grade level, and the thought of retaining him in the fifth grade was not an option. He was identified as a student who was recommended for learning disability testing, but his parents did not want to believe that something was wrong with their child, and refused to get him tested. In New York City, in a push to get away from the higher standards set forth in the No Child Left Behind Act, for promotion to the next grade level, the proficiency threshold was lowered.² They made this decision based in reaction to the incentive schools might have in retaining students to boost their Adequate Yearly Progress. They also hoped it would mitigate the social effects of students who are retaining divesting from their educations as they do not see any investments being made in them. And after managing to score a 2 on his standardized reading exam, he had met the newly adopted city-wide criteria for promotion. Thus, his parents had a ground to argue for his promotion despite his teacher’s insistence on possibly allowing him to repeat the grade and receive more resources in order to help him. Ultimately he was promoted, but then had to repeat a year of high school, due to the different mechanisms of promotion. In this case federal educational policy that promoted what was thought to be good for students, in conjunction with local and state policies created a mess of possible solutions to work through.

More recently the debate over establishing Common Core Standards in relation to receiving federal grant money, has made many states opt in to this new curriculum. Although well-intentioned on equalizing the standards for students coming from different states, they often do not coincide with the standards set by the state or the ones set by school municipalities, due to the needs they can see on a ground level. Tying any policy to funding for something as vital as education has so many unforeseen implications. One of which is simply coercing people to support a policy change they might not otherwise support. And as a result, some state education departments have not rethought their own standards in relation to the federal ones they have opted into. This creates a large responsibility for teachers to adhere to standards that

² https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9470/index1.html
in some cases are actually not compatible. This idea of attempting to establish a common curriculum across the nation is another example of an input based approach to equalizing schools. Surface level approaches to equalizing education often are focused on inputs that can never proceed to produce equal outcomes. As some scholars have mentioned, sometimes proportional distributions of resources are necessary to give schools lacking in resources the opportunity to simply get on the same level as schools that might have more support within them.

One aspect of that is distributing funds proportionally, as some schools have bigger populations and other methods of using the same amount of money to do more. Arts programs are easily one example of a resource that can be funded for schools that might have more expenditures at the present moment rather than later. These programs help keep students engaged and can even bring in local community members to invest in the school’s success. This high level of engagement in local schools between neighbors and students can help to establish a system of accountability that is crucial to preventing truancy, promoting local businesses, and fostering an environment of care for students who may need an additional support system. As the Supreme Court Decision Brown V. Board of Ed was heralded as ending school segregation by deeming separate as inherently unequal, schools are now more segregated and unequal than ever before.³

Providing the same amount of money per student that a school houses, does not take into account that some students may need to access more resources than others. If a remedial class must be taught to a group of students, a teacher, materials, and other supplies go towards that. Although the inputs of money are equal among students, some schools need to receive more funding in order to even sustain an on level populace, rather than having to prioritize and only offer remedial math classes. As people keep celebrating graduating rates of 100%, policies

³ https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/05/17/gao-study-segregation-worsening-us-schools/84508438/
need to focus on getting students there, and not whether the same amount of money and resources are allocated to each student.

The institutional prong of culturally relevant pedagogy suggests that the allocation of school resources needs to be adapted to account for inconsistencies in student populations as well. According to Matthew Lynch in his article, *What Is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?*, "Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teaching in which the students’ unique cultural strengths are identified and nurtured to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student’s cultural place in the world." In other words, it is a teaching style focused on creating a self-importance for students in the lessons they are receiving in school. It also encompasses an understanding of the outside factors that attribute to a child’s educational experience. For me, that meant when I was in second grade, and had difficulty learning the placement of objects and pronouns when forming sentences, my teacher had to understand my familial background. As the daughter of two Jamaican immigrants, who both spoke patois over the phone out of familiarity with family and friends, I had assumed that the replacement of a subject with an object was a matter of stylistic choice. But luckily, as my teacher was of a Caribbean background herself, she quickly found the disconnect and was able to address it. If this had not been the case, who knows if I would have struggled with the foundations of writing, and possibly seen its effects later down the line.

This is the same necessity needed specifically for students of color. When I spoke to a graduate student who had previously participated in Teach For America in St. Louis, she talked about the culture shock of needing to understand that some students are not worried about whether their homework is correct when they need to ensure that they know where their next meal is coming from. Understanding the personal contexts that students bring to the classroom help to remove teacher biases and assumptions about a lack of effort or a general disinterest in class materials.

Ethnic studies programs for instance are one implementation of culturally-relevant
pedagogy. Culturally-relevant pedagogy provides students a space where their creativity can be shown in regards to interpreting assignments and relating them to their own lives and experiences, can only be beneficial. I spent my entire compulsory education career learning about Black history in the small section of the unit on slavery when as the child of immigrants, I did not understand some of the implications it left for many other Black people I knew. When I got to college and was able to not only find an entire department centered on studying different aspects of the African Diaspora, but a class on the Caribbean itself, it helped to reaffirm my decision to come to Cornell, when I felt as though I was not having that quintessential experience of exploring my passions. That class and quite a few others, like the two I took that centered around Hip-Hop last fall, helped to solidify my entire Cornell career as an overachiever who made it all the way to Cornell, just imagine what culturally relevant pedagogy could do for students who feel disengaged from their school curriculum.

In summation, the Education Minor has allowed me to study the inequity inherent in our current education system. One of the biggest things I have been able to encounter is the difference between opportunity, access, and engagement in decisions made about policy. These newly found insights have helped me decide that in whatever capacity I can, I should help to create better foundations for educators.