Throughout my experiences as an education minor and as an undergraduate at Cornell, my perspectives about education have grown immensely. While prior to Cornell I did not realize the true significance of an individualized, student-based classroom, I now realize that there is simply no other way to run a classroom. Even though I once thought that the best teachers were the ones who were extraordinarily proficient in their subjects, I now realize that there are so many more elements that go into being an educator. The greatest takeaway that I have gained from these past four years, though, is that learning truly is a lifelong process. We begin learning about the world around us moments after we are born, and do not stop learning until our final seconds on earth. On my quest as an educator, I know that I will come across hundreds of experiences that will force me to question all that I have learned thus far and to reevaluate how I understand education. I am excited, yet nervous, at the prospect of becoming a K-4 special education teacher in Philadelphia with TFA in only a few short months and beginning my journey to gain a Master’s Degree in Education at the University of Pennsylvania; however, I know that I will be able to rely on the educators who have supported me thus far and the insights that I have gained along the way, which I want to share with you.

1. Students come from a range of backgrounds (i.e. ethnic, racial, ability level, socioeconomic status, etc.) and experiences; therefore, in order to be an effective educator, one must ensure that the needs of all students are being met in a way that is most effective for each individual student.

   Focusing on the overall classroom’s needs is not effective in ensuring that all students can succeed. Instead, educators must be able to realize the needs of each
individual student. Mrs. D, a pre-kindergarten teacher at Caroline Elementary School, exemplified this principle magnificently. I had the opportunity to work with her during my fieldwork for the foundational course of the education minor, EDUC 2410: The Art of Teaching. The first email that she ever sent to me said something along the lines of, “All of the children are wonderful, curious, and excited about school; I simply need eight of me.” However, I did not even realize her expertise in being in eight places at once until I stepped into the classroom on the first day of my fieldwork.

One student specifically who I can recall was E, a three-year old boy with Autism. Since he was a year younger than most of the other children in the classroom and was considered to be low functioning, he had an aide who would stay with him throughout the entire day. Mrs. D did not have the time to divert her attention from the other students for extended periods; therefore, his aide was able to give him the individualized care and attention that he required. Throughout the day, E would receive specific interventions that were meant to help him become verbal and to help him adjust to the sensory overload of being in a classroom with eleven other noisy and rambunctious kids. Some of these interventions included toys that were designed specifically for children with Autism because of the way that they displayed colors and shapes, speech therapy for thirty minutes each day, and integration within the mainstream classroom, which was a key part of his growth and development.

Although the children with disabilities were integrated into the classroom, their individual needs were always met. For example, during “choice time,” Mrs. D was able to have a bit more freedom to walk around the classroom and visit with each of the students. Her ability to understand the needs and preferences of each child was truly
astonishing to me. If there was a group of students working with puzzles, she would know exactly what skill level would be appropriate for each child and how much assistance they would need in completing it. When she saw a child working on a puzzle that was too easy, she would switch it for a puzzle that was closer to their skill level, even making it a bit tricky for them. However, she also recognized when a child was working on a puzzle that was too difficult and offered the appropriate amount of help.

If Mrs. D had tailored her classroom to the “norms” of four to five-year-old children’s development and processing skills, the majority of students would not have benefitted. The biggest lesson that I took away from this fieldwork experience is the importance of recognizing individuals’ needs and the efficacy of focusing on the individual student. While I had always considered the idea of a “norm” to not always hold true, I did not fully grasp the falsity of “norms” until working in a mixed ability classroom. I was able to practice skills regarding working with students with disabilities, which were reflective of what I had been learning throughout my personal research for my final paper in the class as well as in readings that I had done for homework.

This lesson will be especially beneficial to me as I begin my journey into a K-4 special education classroom as a teacher in Philadelphia. Focusing on the “norm” or general needs of my students will not benefit them; however, recognizing each of their unique needs and desires will allow me to be the best teacher that I can be and for them to gain the most out of the classroom.

If there were a singular method that was used for all students with no derivations for individuals’ needs, education would not be nearly as productive as it could be. For
example, teaching third grade students about farm animals solely through the use of a video might not be productive for all students’ learning of the topic. However, using various types of learning tools, such as activities that allow students to write stories about farm animals, reading and listening to stories about farm animals for homework, or taking a trip to an actual farm would all be other ways to engage students in the learning process. These activities would thus target visual learners, auditory learners, and kinesthetic learners, creating a much more inclusive learning environment. In this instance, it becomes clear that using multiple modes of information transfer that focus on individual learning styles is essential. Continuing to utilize this practice will only better the experience of both the educator and the students in his or her classroom.

2. Although you may always want to be seen as the “fun” teacher, order is necessary for a functional classroom and does not mean that the classroom has to be less fun as a result.

As soon as the thought of becoming an educator popped into my mind, I knew that I either wanted to work with elementary school students or college students. The thought of teaching middle schoolers and high schoolers was always too daunting.

When I was scrolling through the course catalogue during the spring of my junior year, the course EDUC 4040: Engaging Students in Learning sparked my interest. After reading through the course description, I learned that the course worked with middle schoolers at DeWitt Middle School. Although the thought of working with middle schoolers frightened me a bit, I wanted to try working with a population of children that I had never gotten the opportunity to work with. I went ahead with enrollment and began the course once the fall semester started up.
On the afternoon of our first fieldwork session at DeWitt, I could not stop thinking about what the kids would be like. Would they be loud and dismissive of what my teaching partner and I wanted to teach them? Would they tower over me? Would they hate me? All of these thoughts were going through my head, making me incredibly anxious for them to finally come into the classroom to meet us.

Fortunately, the students were all excited and motivated to learn and engage in the afterschool program. All of my worry was unfounded, until we began actually filming the scenes for our movie. My partner and I tried to use the “fun” teacher model, where we were fairly lenient with our classroom rules and wanted our students to like us. However, we quickly realized that in order to actually have our film finished by the film festival that we would have to be a bit stricter.

My teaching partner and I brainstormed ways in which we could bring more order to our classroom, but were constantly bombarded by memories of strict teachers who barely even had the word “fun” in their vocabulary. Was there even a way that we could be stricter without making the classroom less fun? We suddenly had an “ah ha” moment and realized that there were plenty of ways to still maintain that “fun” teacher attitude, while simultaneously having more order. We focused heavily on principles of motivation that we had learned in class because we wanted to get the students excited about the material that they were about to learn. The primary motivational principle that we used was to relate what we were doing in film club to their actual lives. While not all of the students were interested in having a future in acting or film, there were plenty of other ways that we could relate what we were doing to their actual lives and future aspirations. For example, to keep the students who were acting on track in memorizing
their lines, we compared it to memorizing information for an important test in high school or to working as a team with their coworkers in their future job, which would require each person doing his or her part. While not all of the ways that we tried to motivate and engage the students always worked, having multiple ideas allowed us to run both a fun and orderly classroom.

Although it can be tough at times to maintain a balance of fun and order, it is not completely impossible and can actually be quite simple. This experience will benefit me, not only in the classroom, but also in my life in general. For example, if I wanted to teach my students how volcanoes work, it would be most exciting for them to build their own volcano and then make it erupt. However, although this would be a really engaging activity, it would require a lot of structure and initial instruction. Therefore, the best way to go about doing this activity would be to begin with lessons about the structure and function of volcanoes and finish with the replica building by the students. Being an educator is a job that comes with infinite responsibilities; therefore, recognizing the importance of a balance of fun and order, and recognizing that there can be a balance, will be beneficial to all members in the classroom.

3. Learning truly is a lifelong process; no matter what a person’s age, they can still learn.

I have experienced countless instances of adults saying, “I’m too old to learn something new.” To them, I always want to say, “Of course you’re not; learning is a lifelong process!” Throughout the course EDUC 2210: Introduction to Adult Learning, I have truly grasped the importance of supporting and understanding the desires of adult learners. Prior to the course, I had already been working with an adult learner named C through the organization Friends of Farmworkers. C wanted to practice and perfect her
English because of the numerous injustices that she faced as a Spanish speaker in the United States. Although she was in her late twenties when I met her, her potential to learn was immeasurable. Each week I would present her with vocabulary lists of words that she wanted to learn, activities that used those words, and then practice that she could do until the next time that we met. When I would return the next week for tutoring, we would review the words, and she would remember nearly all of them. Her fervor for learning did not quit, and her persistence was steadfast.

Over the past four years, C’s verbal and grammatical skills have improved immensely. When I go to tutor her now, we begin our conversations in English, trying to use as little Spanish as possible. Her daughter, E, is being raised bilingual, which is only possible because of C’s interest in learning English. Adults have the power and ability to learn, although not quite as quickly or easily, as much as young children do when they put their minds to it. It is important, though, to realize the potential barriers for adult learning due to family and work pressures. While learning is most definitely a lifelong process, as seen with C and with the CLASP learner that I worked with throughout the semester, adult learning brings with it additional barriers and considerations that the learners must combat in order to continue their education.

The majority of the focus in education and for educational programs focuses on K-12 learning and higher education; however, the focus rarely shifts to adult learning. Since a K-12 education is mandatory in most states, teacher-training programs are keen on putting out enough educators to teach all of those children. However, after twelfth grade, the percentage of people continuing onto educational institutions, such as university and postgraduate schools, is much slimmer. Therefore, it is not surprising that
the focus on training adult educators is uncommon, even though it is something that needs to shift.

The key lesson and point that we have focused on throughout the course and throughout our individual meetings with our CLASP learning partners has been the significance of the phrase “learning is a lifelong process.” Not only has it been influential in our interactions with our adult learning partners, but also in understanding how to become future educators. This insight will be beneficial to me throughout my life, eventually as an adult learner myself. I aspire to be that eighty-year-old learning how to speak German or taking a course on Organic Chemistry. By continuing to learn throughout my life, I will be able to have an impact both on my personal growth and on my students’ growth as well. I will be able to teach my students the importance of education, instilling in them a love of learning. Realizing the importance of adult education is crucial in enabling learning to be the lifelong process that it is meant to be. Further, recognizing that learning does not stop at a certain age will ensure that training programs, workshops, and optional classes continue to be offered for adults wanting to better their knowledge of elements necessary for their work, home, or personal life.

Conclusion

In sum, my experiences as an education minor and as an undergraduate student at Cornell have been indescribable. I could not have asked for a better sum of courses, fieldwork experiences, mentors, and students. I aspire to eventually become a policy maker, working specifically to end educational injustices and inequities in schools. Although I still have a lot to learn, I am confident that these experiences and insights will guide me along the way.