What does it Really Mean to be an Educator in Today’s Society?

I grew up in a rural, homogenous, blue collar community in Central New York. There were fewer than 2,000 people in my town and just under 500 students in my high school. Being that the community was small and close-knit, everyone, for the most part, was very familiar with one another.

Growing up I often heard the saying, “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.” Unfortunately, I was unaware of the rude, false nature of this slogan until I came to college. My grandmother was an elementary school teacher before she met my grandfather, and I used to love listening to her stories from the classroom. I really looked up to her and, as a result, entertained the idea of becoming a teacher from a very young age. Unfortunately, that saying lingered in the back of my mind. It forced me to question: why would I go to Cornell University to become a teacher? I went back and forth on the topic and I initially felt as if I would not be putting me degree to good use. However, it was not until I began taking education courses that I realized the true meaning and value behind a successful, impactful educator in today’s society.

#1: A successful educator is able to connect with their students by means of creating an environment that is conducive to learning.

In The Art of Teaching (EDUC 2410), I connected with Mrs. Ryan, a 5th grade social studies teacher from Lansing. I deeply value this experience, hold it close to my heart, and hope that one day I can be at least half the educator she is.

I was beyond nervous walking into Lansing Middle School on my first day of fieldwork. Many questions were running through my mind. What is Mrs. Ryan like? Are the
students going to like me? What am I going to get out of this? Putting my fears aside, I opened the classroom door and walked into what would be the most meaningful learning experience of my time at Cornell.

Mrs. Ryan took the time to get to know each of her students on a more personal level. As the 5th grade students in Lansing were already switching classes, she prided herself on learning about each student that belonged to the 5th grade cohort. She always had an open ear through which she learned about their likes and dislikes. Among other things, she also learned about each student’s family, their family’s economic situation (within reason), and other factors that might impede the student’s ability to learn inside the classroom.

Mrs. Ryan took pride in knowing this information about her students. It allowed her to structure her classroom and modify her teaching style in a way that would optimize her students’ success. One way she did this was by providing the students with materials needed to complete an assignment (markers, poster board, etc.). She also had a drawer full of snacks. During one of our conversations, Mrs. Ryan mentioned that some of her students were on free or reduced price breakfast/lunch. She always told her students that they cannot learn on an empty stomach, thus encouraging them to take advantage of the snack drawer. To my surprise, the student’s did not take full advantage of free snacks. Reflecting upon the snack drawer, Mrs. Ryan noted that once it was implemented, there was a significant increase in the student’s attentiveness during the class period.

Regardless of the student’s background, Mrs. Ryan, in a sense, acted as a mother to each of her students. She ensured they all felt comfortable in her classroom and continually reminded them of their value. She displayed the utmost trust, respect and appreciation for
her students and their well-being, and thus, her students felt comfortable coming to her with both academic and personal problems. Through forging these special relationships with her students, Mrs. Ryan commanded and earned an unparalleled level of respect.

Ultimately, Mrs. Ryan taught me that acknowledging a student’s basic human needs and taking interest in their unique personalities are critical components of being a successful educator. Mrs. Ryan demonstrated this by building relationships with students based on mutual levels of trust and respect. In my opinion, establishing these relationships and continually building on them are among the ways an educator can create an environment that is conducive to learning.

Because of Mrs. Ryan, I now understand the importance of taking the time getting to know the people around you, fostering relationships, and attempting to understand the challenges they may be facing in their personal lives. Moving forward, I will carry this message throughout all aspects of my life. Overall, this experience will be extremely beneficial as I continue with my education and begin to work with new people on projects. I strongly believe that applying these insights to a group work setting ensures success. Sure, I do not have to be the best of friends with my partners, yet we will be successful if we are honest with one another and respect each other’s opinions.

**#2: As a successful educator you need to be flexible and able to adapt in any situation.**

As an educator, you need to be able to think on your feet, be flexible, and be able to adapt in any situation. Recently, during my senior year of college, this point became evident to me as I was confronted with an issue that required me to adapt.

In Youth Organization’s and Leadership Development (EDUC 3350), I had the opportunity to learn about programs related to education, such as FFA and 4H. As part of
this course, we were given the opportunity to listen to a panel of local Ag teachers that are involved in FFA and 4H, as well as community outreach and extension programs. One of the things that specifically stuck with me from the panel was the idea that during any lesson you need to have a backup plan and seamlessly be able to adapt to the situation. One educator specifically stated, “You must have a backup plan for your backup plan.” At the time I felt as if this comment was a little excessive. However, this point was quickly reaffirmed during a 4H workshop and throughout my experiences as a teaching assistant for EDUC 2410.

As part of EDUC 3350, a classmate and I were required to run a workshop for the Cortland County 4H program. Prior to this course, I had never been involved in 4H and had only recently learned about it through class. Therefore, I didn’t realize how young the students would be. As a result, the lesson that my partner and I had prepared on plants was far too advanced. Originally, we had planned to show pictures of plants and animals and then ask the students to draw a connection between the two. We had also planned on speaking to them about the structure and function of a plant, and then we would close by allowing them to plant their own plant.

Even after realizing how young the students were, we initially continued on with our lesson as we had planned. Yet, once we realized that it wasn’t going well and that the students were more interested in fidgeting with one another than listening to us, we decided to adapt the lesson to a more hands-on approach. We continued with the picture cards, showing pictures of grass and, a cow, but we adjusted how we would assist the students in making the connection that the cow eats the plants. Rather than doing each part of the lesson independently, we combined our diagram of a plant with the hands-on
planting lesson. We gave the students their plants and directed them to physically touch and indicate the specific portion of the plant that we were talking about, using the diagram as a guide. As we were able to adapt, I strongly believe that the students were able to learn and get more out of the experience. Plus, they really enjoyed the lesson!

Another way I have learned about adapting is through my experiences as a teaching assistant for EDUC 2410, a role I am currently serving. Midway through this semester I was tasked with leading a lecture on Elementary Education. I had previously planned my lecture to include a bell ringer, a student-led reading discussion, a Power Point series, and a closing activity. The student's were not as receptive to my lecture slides as I had hoped, it took me a little while to realize this, but once I did, I quickly adapted my teaching style. Instead of lecturing the information at the students, I began to ask thought-provoking questions about the material. Asking questions really seemed to engage the students with the material on a deeper level. This was beneficial and I feel as if the students enjoyed it more than simply listening to me talk.

Through EDUC 2410 and EUDC 3350, I learned that the ability to adapt and think on your feet is a critical component of being a successful educator. As I continue on, these insights will hold true in various aspects of my life. In my personal life I will need to be able to adapt and change plans that may be more convenient for my family and friends. Additionally, in my professional life and future career it is critical that I am able to adapt in any situation, whether that be taking a supporting role rather than a leadership role in a group, or making last minute alterations.

#3: As a successful educator, you are required to possess not only the technical skills, but also a clear understanding of the ways in which a school operates as well as a working philosophy of education.
Finally, in order to be a successful educator, you must possess more than just the technical skills. Yes, you must be able to clearly ask a question, clearly articulate a point, and seamlessly lead a discussion. However, you must also clearly understand factors within the school system that influence the students’ learning.

Prior to taking America’s Promise: Social and Political Context of American Education (EDUC 2710), I was unaware of the various reasons why students are failing in the classroom. Were the students not succeeding because they were not putting time or effort into their work? Or, on the contrary, was it the educator that was not putting the time into their students? This course really opened my eyes to the current state of our educational system and areas in which improvement is greatly needed.

One of the many factors that hold’s a student back is the achievement gap. The achievement gap presents a clear distinction between students’ educational achievement based upon gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. The achievement gap appears early in a student’s formal schooling. As educators, it is important to recognize the achievement gap and to do your best to keep it from widening further. It is important to assess each student’s ability at the beginning of the year and then do recurring checks throughout the school year. In doing so, you will determine where they stand academically and whether they understand the material. This information will allow you to build your lessons based on each student’s ability. However, a recurring question of mine is: How can we work to get the students performing at the lowest level up to speed, without neglecting the students at the top of the class?

Additionally, in Educational Psychology (EDUC 3110), I learned the importance of maintaining a ‘working’ educational philosophy. As times are constantly changing, it is
important to be aware of outside factors that influence the educational system as a whole and utilize that knowledge when crafting your approach in the classroom. It is evident that students are not all the same. They learn best through different mediums and they do not all learn at the same pace. A working educational philosophy, a solid understanding of current events and keeping up with the times are critical components that go into being a successful educator. By being aware of this information, as an educator you will be able to determine what approach would be most beneficial to your students and through which medium to present it.

Moving forward, I will find value from these insights in my future career. Especially, after I get my MBA, if I continue to work in a business-related role, it is critical to be aware and understand outside factors that could influence the market and consumers. Additionally I will be able to utilize knowledge of outside factors when it comes to crafting my approach on how to deal with an issue. I will also ensure that there is always room for modifications within my approach and viewpoint on the subject.

**Conclusion**

Due to these experiences, I have come to formulate my own definition of what it means to not only be successful as an educator, but to also be successful in life. To me success cannot be measured monetarily. Success must be measured throughout ones sense of joy and personal fulfillment.

As I continue on with my education in pursuit of my Masters of Business Administration, I will carry these skills that I have learned, apply them at my future University, in my career, and in my personal life. The notion of going above and beyond to connect with those around you, being able to adapt in various situations and understanding
events that may influence either your project or your life. Even though my time as an undergraduate student may be coming to an end, I believe it is critical to realize that at some point others will look to you for guidance and advice, and my extensive learning experiences throughout the education minor have prepared me for this. Even though you may be the one giving the advice, it is critical to look at each moment as a learning opportunity through which you have the potential to grow.