Education Capstone: Insights as an Education Minor

There is a hackneyed saying- “those who can do, do; those who can’t, teach.” The academic, personal, and emotional journey I have embarked on as an undergraduate student at Cornell University have greatly discredited this myth. More specifically, pursuing the minor in education has taught me just the opposite. Those who can, teach. Those who are bold, committed to social justice, passionate, compassionate, and persistent, teach. My interdisciplinary coursework as part of the education minor has helped me learn and appreciate the value of teachers in all capacities. Furthermore, it has helped solidify my desire to become a post-secondary educator one day because I firmly believe that the wealth of resources I have been exposed to and the lessons learned will serve me well during the next phase of my life. As I reflect on my work within the minor, I have identified three major insights that are fundamental to the practice of education, as a whole. They are outlined below.

Insight #1: Representation, Cultural Appreciation, Competency, and Understanding are Integral Components in Creating a Safe and Successful Classroom Climate

Of the multiple insights I will outline in this essay, the capacity for teachers to actively engage with the cultural backgrounds within their classroom resonates with me the most. Perhaps it is my identity as a first-generation student of color who, up until my matriculation at Cornell, had only ever been exposed to academic environments that echoed my race and other values inherent in my background. The stark transition from being immersed in primarily black environments to predominantly white environments has made me realize the necessity of striving to create a friendly balance in all classrooms, especially across the domains of race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious background, sexuality, and gender. The differences that exist
within specific domains should also be noted. Unfortunately, the aforementioned types of equally integrated classrooms portray a utopic ideal that is simply not a reality in current-day American society. Living in a country that is overwhelmingly segregated via race and socioeconomic status (not only in schools, but in neighborhoods, places of work, etc.) means that some students will inevitably be lumped together by such factors; and because the United States is no meritocracy, even hard work and high achievement do not guarantee long-term success. With the United States Department of Education continuously de-funding schools and education programs and enforcing a set of standards that they expect all students to conform to, teachers represent a tremendous hope that students of all backgrounds still can succeed; teachers have the power to influence bottom-up change that will potentially impact policy decisions made in Washington. Given the demographic changes throughout the United States, focusing energy into ensuring the next generation of educators is well-equipped to handle such changes will suit society well.

For example, by highlighting representation as an integral component in creating a safe and successful classroom climate, I argue that to a certain extent, it could be beneficial for students to be educated by individuals who possess some of the same salient identities that they do. For instance, throughout my secondary schooling, at least 80% of the educators I interacted with were also black. At the time, neither of my parents had the privilege of attending a traditional college or university (my mother defied all odds and went on to obtain her bachelor’s degree at 45 years old), so seeing and learning from highly educated black individuals let me know as a young black girl that I, too, could accomplish my dreams. Despite what the media portrayed (blacks as thugs, gangsters, lazy, ghetto, “Welfare Queens,” and worse), my lived experiences during secondary schooling made it evident that black people were magic. We could do anything that anybody else could do. Little black boys and little black girls need real-life role-models, not just the ones they
see on television. They need people who are tangible. Representation, or the lack thereof, in today’s classrooms, has significant implications for future thought and education. I would propose more governmental, state-wide, local, and university programs that are aimed towards increasing the quantity of educators of color. This could also involve changing the general perception and appreciation of educators within society. We need to demand that educators are compensated more for their work, provided other incentives, and supported throughout the process. We do not only need people of color who will enter the field of education, but we need people of color who will stay; there needs to be more of a focus on teacher retention.

Recruiting more educators of color will take time. In the meantime, since it is widely known that roughly 80% of teachers today are white, efforts should be made to inform today’s teachers on practices and behaviors they can develop to be more effective when working with diverse groups of students. In my “Multicultural Issues in Education” and “Anthropology of Education” classes, we studied the works of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Prudence Carter, and Bic Ngo that explored culturally relevant teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical race theory as aspects that create culturally appreciative and competent instructors. According to Ladson-Billings, “Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. A pedagogy that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures. Culturally Responsive Teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning.” In the spirit of student health and educational equity, we should all heed the words of Ladson-Billings and like-minded scholars. For example, instead of trivializing cultural differences by offering a “multicultural day” where students can bring in different foods that reflect different cultural
backgrounds, whole modules should be devoted to fully encompassing the cultural backgrounds of students (not limited only to food, but customs, values, and beliefs as well) this and teachers can learn more about students by being involved in the communities in which their students live. In other words, cultural competence is a process by which teachers constantly learn from students, the school, and the community around them. Full cultural competence can never be achieved, but must continuously and ardently be sought after.

**Insight #2: The Art of Teaching is a constant act of co-learning. Students are not “tabulae rasae” and are more than capable of contributing to classroom settings**

Interestingly enough, the first class I took as an education minor was called “The Art of Teaching.” This course emphasized education theory and different schools of thought (such as existentialism, pragmatism, realism, and idealism). Additionally, I participated in a semester-long fieldwork assignment at the Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC) where I dedicated a few hours a week to helping students with homework and overseeing their recreational activities. Most of the children I observed at GIAC were low-income people of color. In so many ways, it paralleled my own secondary schooling experiences. What I enjoyed most about this volunteerism was the freedom it gave me to participate with students. Since it was an essentially unstructured setting, I appreciated relying on the students themselves to learn more about the work they were doing inside and outside of classrooms; I also believed that when given the chance and encouragement, students would find it within themselves to become co-constructors in the production of knowledge. Despite what John Locke would argue, students are not “tabulae rasae,” or blank slates. As long as educators make a concerted effort to remember that each student brings with
them a unique set of cultural value and do their best to actively engage with the student, a safer classroom space is created.

This same type of logic has applied to me in certain settings. During the second semester of my freshman year and right after being a student in “The Art of Teaching,” I volunteered to be a Teaching Assistant for the class. It was an interesting position, being that most of the students in the class were older than me and for quite some time it took me a while to develop a healthy balance between fellow student and partial classroom leader. As I began to assert myself in situations, I also remembered that especially since many of the people in the class were older, they had a wealth of information (from lived experiences and other classes they had taken while at Cornell) they could provide to me to help as a TA and also as a co-learner.

In terms of implications for future thought and action, I think that undergraduate education programs and teacher training programs could benefit from some restructuring that equally emphasizes the role of students and teachers alike within classroom spaces. For example, teachers should be constantly reminded of their role as facilitators. While they may be the experts on some topics, they should be self-aware of their role by letting students contribute in unique ways as well. This goal could be established by students and teachers working together to ensure a set of guidelines is followed during the duration of the semester or school year and not always lecturing students during class. In fact, we could learn a lot about this from other cultures. During the fall semester of my junior year, I studied abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark where I spent a lot of time observing Danish classrooms. Danish educators have a laissez-faire approach with students. Learning is student-directed and students come up with the topics they wish to discuss throughout the school year. Then, students and teachers actively work together to accomplish those goals.
Insight #3: Teaching is multifaceted, and necessitates the ability to maintain sound mental and emotional wellbeing to operate at optimal capacity

We are often warned about the deleterious impact of teacher burnout- described as teachers who begin to feel overwhelmingly stressed from the demands of their profession. As a result, many dedicated and once hopeful educators leave the classroom and pursue other career opportunities. This behavior is understandable, especially given the generally excessive demands of the school district, state and national government to achieve academic standards, parents, students, etc. (not only academically but with potential personal stressors at home as well). In order to support teachers more, we should emphasize and make mental health counseling accessible and create other venues for teachers to receive the support they so desperately need.

According to Franchesca Warren, there are a few methods teachers can implement in order to ensure that the likelihood of teacher burnout is diminished, including prioritizing what is most important in order to finish the school year strong and participating in summer activities that are unrelated to school events. It was fascinating coming across this tidbit of advice via an article I found on the internet because it was the same advice that was reiterated to me during the time I spent as a summer camp counselor for the Upward Bound program at the University of South Carolina. Mr. Prince and Mrs. Weston were two project coordinators who in addition to organizing the details of the summer program, had to facilitate the program during the academic school year. Unlike traditional school teachers, their work literally took place year-round. However, I noticed how they both took advantage of time off, planned vacation trips to new places, and made sure they separated office (school) work from their time at home. For example, instead of taking papers home to grade, they would spend an extra few minutes or hours on campus so that at home, they could use the time to relax and bond with family members.
In addition to teachers taking the initiative to protect their own mental and emotional wellbeing, schools themselves should have outlets and support systems for their own teachers. While there is a significant focus on guidance counselors for students, what about encouraging the use of on-site mental health professionals for teachers? Educators need people they can turn to when they are feeling overwhelmed. Even if mental health counselors are not always available, perhaps schools can facilitate formal teacher-based groups where they can share their concerns with each other while offering support. More governmental funding should be promoted to this. Especially since teachers are not compensated nearly enough for their efforts, we can at least offer them support systems with little or no financial burden on their part.

Conclusion

Overall, I hope this reflection has delineated my position on the powerful impact of teachers not only in classrooms, but in society as a whole and the steps we can collectively take to continue to positively impact students nationwide. Ultimately, teaching is the profession that makes all other professions possible. Let us do more to support teachers in the short-term and long-term.
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May 15, 2017
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Works Cited


