The Education minor at Cornell provides a series of unique opportunities to connect students with the surrounding Ithaca community, a factor that allows for lecture implementation, critical reflection, and assuming the position of an educator. During my time at Cornell, I have completed five classes, three fieldwork assignments, two teaching assistance-ships, and one internship revolving around the field of education. While each has been different in its own right, there are several motifs that I feel adequately summarize some of the fundamental take-aways of my minor experience. These motifs revolve around three central ideas: the students, the language, and the strategies, and with these I have been able to generate several insights that I feel are central to my time in the Education department at Cornell.

I have found that teaching requires more than mastering academic material – it is an affective process that requires knowing students on a personal level. This is an idea that surfaces time and time again in courses such as EDUC 4040 and The Art of Teaching, but I do not think that this has been as salient to me as a seemingly mundane moment in Ms. Sheri’s pre-k classroom at Beverly J. Martin Elementary. Ms. Sheri had one four-year-old, Jayce, who struggled to stay focused. He was easily bored by the typical pre-k exercises - tracing letters and numbers, coloring pictures of Cat in the Hat, and singing songs about the weather. Instead he was constantly itching to run on the playground or to crash around with the box of Legos stashed in the back of the room. His one true love, and the topic that he rambled about every Monday when recounting his weekend, was baseball. He knew all the players, and would always wear Red Sox shirts to class.

On this day in particular, I found myself working with Jayce one-on-one. He had finished the assignment early, some basic task that he rushed through, and when I came to sit with him he was playing with colored foam shapes that fit onto 2-dimensional pictures. The purpose of the
activity was to lay the shapes onto the pictures in a corresponding pattern, but Jayce preferred to create his own patterns on the floor. I sat next to him and, trying to engage him, picked up one of the shapes. “Jayce, what’s this color?” He looked at me and shrugged. “Is it blue?” “No, purple!” he suddenly exclaimed. The shape was orange.

“Where would this go on the picture?” I extended the shape towards him, expecting him to reach for it. Instead he cupped his tiny hands, his eyes beginning to gleam with the mischievous light that I had come to recognize. “Throw it and I’ll tell you,” he said. In this moment I saw an opportunity, I had leverage. “I’ll throw it if you tell me what color it is.”

Thus began a little game. I would hold up a shape, and if he could correctly identify the color or shape of it then I would lightly toss it to him to catch and sort into color-coordinated piles. He was busily sorting shapes when Ms. Sheri knelt down next to me and, to my surprise, thanked me. “He’s been struggling with shapes and colors for a while now. Thank you so much for doing this with him, I think it’s really helping!”

And it did. Integrating Jayce’s love of baseball with learning shapes and colors became his new favorite game, and over my sessions in the classroom I saw him improve substantially in his abilities. This example captures the importance of knowing students personally. Not only did I cater to Jayce’s interactive learning style, but through incorporating something that he loved I kept him motivated and engaged.

The deeply personal nature of teaching is not a new idea, but it is one that requires thought and consideration. One of the best ways to encourage this is to demonstrate it in education classes. Begin the semester having students introduce each other using hobbies or fun facts, take the time to learn students’ names, pay attention to how students respond to lessons and use varying forms of assessment so that all learning styles are addressed. Methods such as these
are not especially time consuming, but can go a long way in building connections between a teacher and his or her students.

My second insight is the importance of language and how the diction that one selects can alter classroom dynamics. In EDUC 2410 we often talk about complimenting the action, rather than the person. A great example of this was while I was interviewing in a pre-k classroom. One little girl traced half of the circles on her worksheet and then wanted to go paint. She was getting fidgety and upset, until I pointed at her paper and said, “Look! I really like how you traced these circles. Can you show me again on this one?” She gladly complied. I had just met that student moments before, and knew nothing about her personally to use to get her to focus. However, using positive language that focused on her actions in the classroom worked instantly to motivate her and made her feel efficacious.

The power of diction was also emphasized in several of my Education classes. Dr. Sipple’s EDUC 2710 policy class introduced me to the concept of cultural differences in language. Historically, Black homes tend to use direct commands to direct orders at young children, whereas White homes typically phrase orders as questions (ex. Do you want to set the table? Vs. Go set the table). This causes a dissonance in classrooms with White teachers and Black students. Dr. Sipple taught us that, often times, Black students are labeled as insubordinate or problematic for failing to follow teacher commands. Their character is called into question, when really it is a mismatch of language that is causing a lack of understanding. When a White teacher asks a Black student “Do you want to sit down,” and the student says “No,” it is because they hear the question for what it is, a question. Not a command. On some level this insight returns to the idea of knowing your students and the cultural backgrounds from which they come. But on another it shows how important it is to be cognizant of the language that you use while in
the classroom, for it can act as a motivating factor or as one that is disadvantageous to certain students.

Another example of this was in my Intergroup Dialogue Class. Being in the sexual orientation section, several of our dialogues revolved around the innate human need to categorize individuals. This can be detrimental to people who are bisexual or are questioning their sexualities, for it puts pressure on them to be fully gay or fully straight. In addition, categorizing individuals perpetuates stereotypes that may not apply to all homosexuals, thus enforcing the idea of homonormativity and the expectation that one’s sexual orientation defines how they act as people. Mental health issues are rampant in the sexual minority community, and part of the problem is language. As a teacher, it is important to avoid this and to be aware of how you address students. In regards to future application, I think that this insight can be used in classroom management. Using positive reinforcement, like I did with the pre-k child, and strategies like not calling students out in front of their peers generates respect between teachers and students. Establishing this trusting relationship is important for creating a welcoming, safe environment for students to learn.

My final insight is that implementation is everything. I believe that this insight applies to all disciplines, not just education. As someone interested in child clinical psychology, I spent my summer interning at a pediatric hospital in Genoa, Italy. Here, I did play therapy with autistic children between the ages of zero and three, and it was infinitely different from reading about the symptoms of autism in class. Professors do not tell you about the “good” days and the “bad” days. They do not tell you that patients can flip over nothing and immediately throw a tantrum that it is your responsibility to stop. They tell you that patients are temperamental in their own
rights, but it is up to you to remember if someone is overly sensitive to loud noises, or if the color red makes them panic.

Within my minor, I think that the class that best demonstrated the importance of implementation and practice was EDUC 4040. Several of the readings in this class emphasized that a classroom should sustain a caring, inclusive environment to foster student growth, but this is easier said than done. One idea that we discussed was space, specifically the use of space. Classroom set-up is documented as having unintended psychological effects on students and is one of the methods that a teacher can use to facilitate student growth. Placing student desks in rows is isolating, prohibits social interaction, and establishes a one-dimensional classroom culture in which the teacher appears dictator-like. In addition to classroom layout, we also learned the importance of using space as a teacher. This idea quickly became essential for my partner and me in our film club fieldwork. One of our students had extreme ADHD. Full of wonderful, eccentric ideas, we loved having him in our group, but he was also distracting and could not sit still. We found that having one of us sit next to him for the “boring” lectures resulted in a far calmer experience. If he had comments he could whisper them to us without disrupting the class, and he was far less likely to sit precariously on his chair – one of his favorite activities.

It was one experience to read about the importance of spacing in the classroom and to draw connections to my own educational experiences, but quite another to be in the position to manipulate them for myself. I think that this, above all of my other insights, is the most critical for future thought and action. Aspiring teachers need classroom experience through fieldwork and volunteering, and I believe that it should fall on professors to ensure that they have the opportunities to do so. I personally would not have had nearly as much teaching experience
without participating in the hands-on nature of the education minor, and honestly I am not sure that I ever would have recognized my passion for teaching young children without it.

In concluding my final semester here at Cornell I find myself reflecting more upon the faces of my students rather than the pages of reading that I have consumed. These little humans were my teachers in their own ways - they tutored me, mentored me, and gave me unforgettable experiences that have shaped my future directions. It is the application of the strategies, listening to and observing the language of others, and creating deeply personal bonds with people, not books, that makes for the best teachers, and I am thankful that Cornell has granted me the opportunities to meet so many incredible individuals who have made me realize this over the past three years.