

Ali Bell

May 1, 2016

Course Project

Dr. Smagorinsky

LLED 3461-S

Option Two:

As an English Education major at the University of Georgia, I knew I would be doing a fair bit of observation/student teaching/mentoring at local schools, but until taking Dr. Peter Smagorinsky's service learning class, I had never heard of Classic City High School. When I first heard the name I honestly imagined some kind of weird after school type program forced on local high school students by UGA students looking for credit hours, but I was way off. Classic City High School started as a Bill and Melinda Gates project and although the source of funding has since changed hands, the school is still up to the standard of the Gates Foundation and is a remarkably positive program for many students. Whether a student is having a hard time recovering credits after a few failed classes or just wants to graduate early, CCHS has a way to reach every student's goals. There's still prom, cliques, and the occasional flair up of bad behavior, but I found it extremely comforting to know that each and every student had made a choice to attend Classic City. There is an application process and from what I have heard it is not exactly a piece of cake to get in; I knew everyday that each of these young people wanted to learn or at least wanted a High School Diploma.

I felt as though I had been fed a lot of negative opinions about Clarke County and its schools and I honestly dreaded my first day. I was so surprised that behind Cook Out

was this little community of quite new buildings that were home to Classic City High School, the Clarke County Schools County Office, and a GED/night school program. It looked similar to my high school, white cinderblock walls and speckled floors; the only notable difference was the relatively (my high school had 3,500 students) small population of students. After checking in with Mrs. Mimi, the woman who was in charge of the mentor/mentee program who also seems to be a little bit in charge of everything, I went on my first visit to Mr. Stanley's classroom.

Mr. Stanley introduced himself and then explained that he likes to start his class with thirty minutes on independent reading on Wednesdays. At first I thought I had just lucked out and could squeeze in some homework reading each week, but I soon realized just how much more this exercise meant. As the weeks progressed I watched students beg for books to be brought out from the back or request a quick overview of any new news articles. There were even a set of cousins that would race into the classroom, lock eyes with me, and just say "did she get it yet?" dying to know if they would get to continue reading *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen. Having never read the book I do not really have an opinion, but if you want to hear a five star review just ask Tonya or Alisha. I hadn't seen this much genuine interest in reading in any high school before. Not a single student in any of my AP classes raced for a book, and until Mr. Stanley's class I thought that excitement was just something that died out after the elementary school hype about the next *Magic Tree House*.

Conveniently enough, my book club selected Kelly Gallagher's *Readicide* as one of our chosen texts. Here Gallagher explains this lack of interest in reading and also explains why Mr. Stanley's class is so vastly different than any other classroom.

Gallagher defines his new term for the loss of the love of reading as “Read-i-cide-n: The systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (Gallagher 2). One of the main solutions that *Readicide* suggests for the classroom is to provide a “book flood” or a large selection of interesting reading material (Gallagher 29). Naturally I thought of Mr. Stanley’s stacks of magazines and books that each student had access to at all times. When Gallagher then mentioned providing Sustained Silent Reading in the classroom just like Mr. Stanley does every Wednesday, I just had to ask if he had read Gallagher and he says he has not but I can’t say I’m completely sold.

My first few weeks at Classic City Mr. Stanley had me just mingling around the students helping as they had questions and checking in on what they were working on. Although I had expected to be paired up with just one student, I ended up being grateful for these few weeks. This particular class, E2020, was an online version of English in which every student took whatever English course they needed to complete, but all students were part of the same class/had the same teacher available for questions. Mrs. Mimi made it clear on the first day that this was not the ideal setting for any of the students, but Mr. Stanley found ways to make the class feel integrated and provided special attention to each student so the learning process was not entirely electronic. I hope to bring some of Mr. Stanley’s techniques into my own English class because he found ways to have genuine connections with each student and used the students interests/skills/life experiences to pull material out of the generic web based format and made English “real” for these students. I learned a lot about coping with imperfect

situations in the first few weeks, but later on Mr. Stanley decided to pair me up with Bryson.

Bryson is probably one of the most outspoken ridiculous people I've ever met, but my goodness he can make the whole room laugh in a heartbeat. The first day I met him he decided that the first thing he should do is stare at my feet and exclaim "Dang girl! You got some baby feet!" I really don't know why that was so hilarious, but it was certainly a unique icebreaker. As Bryson and I worked through his 12<sup>th</sup> grade literature class, we had our fair share of laughs but also talked a lot about literature. One of the most frustrating things about E2020 has to be the way the exams are set up. An exam would reference a poem or book, sometimes even a specific stanza, but not provide that text for the student. Bryson had been guessing on all of these questions because he really wasn't sure if the write work would come up on Google so he just gave up. I could tell in one look if it was the right text but I just cannot wrap my head around why they would expect students to find the works on their own. Once Bryson started looking at the texts and genuinely trying to understand the piece and answer the questions, he was skipping whole units by not only passing pre-tests, but actually making high B's. I loved watching him do better and better, but when I came in on my second to last week to see his seat empty I learned he had done so well that he was finished with this class. I was sad that I didn't get to say goodbye, but even if I had I know it would have just been a series of jokes and him asking once again if I was "suuuureee" I wanted to be a *teacher*?? Yes, yes I do, Bryson. Bryson may have thought I was crazy to become a teacher, but he always made sure to comment on the fact that Mr. Stanley, and the staff at Classic City as a

whole, were much more understanding and catered to his personal needs much better than anyone he worked with at the local public high school, Clarke Central.

I feel like the format of Classic City does a very good job at helping students recover credits and graduate as quickly as possible, but the online classes and lack of human interaction takes away a lot of the true learning that I hope to see in my future classrooms. In my opinion, the true learning happened in Mr. Stanley's classroom when he was talking one on one with students or taking time away from the electronic curriculum to talk about current events, literature, or just answered a question that some of the students were struggling with. I understand that a traditional lecture based class could not accommodate students taking multiple different English courses, but I feel that Mr. Stanley took the time to make his classroom as interactive as possible. He did an excellent job of keeping order in his classroom (no cellphones or Netflix) while still building relationships with each student that aided in the learning process. I hope to emulate his creativity and mindfulness as I continue into my educational career. Overall I am very thankful for this experience and my mentoring has given me new hope for my future and much more confidence about my future career.

#### Works Cited:

Gallagher, Kelly, and Richard L. Allington. *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing*

*Reading and What You Can Do about It*. Portland, Me.: Stenhouse, 2009. Print.