

Allye Druian

Smagorinsky

LLED 3461

28 April 2018

Experience at Classic City High School

*Names have been changed for confidentiality

I couldn't have been more grateful for my experience at Classic City High School. Classic City High School was unlike anything I have seen before and was definitely an eye opening experience. My time with these kids will forever be engrained in my mind as these students come from all different backgrounds but we were able to bond over one aspect: learning.

Walking into Classic City High School, I was quite nervous as I wasn't sure what to expect. When Ms. Mimi, the graduation coach, gave her introduction to our class about the school and its purpose, I couldn't help but think that this couldn't be any more different from my high school in Gwinnett County. She explained to us that the school benefited the students who had to either leave the public school system for disciplinary reasons or had extenuating circumstances. Students are able to move at their own pace as 90% of school work is online. This allows for students who were several grades behind in one subject area to catch up or in some cases, complete their necessary classes for a diploma in a quick period of time instead of taking 4 years. I knew certain schools like Classic City existed and had high success rates but I had never experienced one first hand. My high school experience was quite different from the environment at Classic City. I attended Peachtree Ridge High School, which is over three thousand students in

the suburbs of Atlanta. Compared to Classic City, my high school was very traditional and everyone moved at the same pace. Our classroom instruction included our teacher in the front delivering direction or promoting student discussion. Majority of our schoolwork and assignments were given out in hard copies and were to be turned in as hard copies. Due to such a high volume of students, your average classroom size was 28 to 30 students and a normal day would be 100% attendance. At Classic City, I was informed that if 8 students showed up then that was a good day. Each Student there had a laptop and an assigned student number so that their progress would be tracked ny the teachers online which I think is genius. The Teachers were able to be up to date with each students progress through the use of Google.

I had the pleasure of working in Mr. Smith's* classroom in his first period 12th grade English and second period 11th grade English. My first day he welcomed me with a grand smile and overwhelming enthusiasm for our upcoming time together. There were only six students in attendance that day which I found astounding and wondered if the class sizes were that small due to the student body being well under 200. Mr. Smith then informed me that this is on average the normal amount of attendees on a day-to-day basis. Throughout my time I would see certain students come and go and some were on the roster that I never met which I found quite disheartening. I asked Mr. Smith how he handled the on and off attendance of his students and he simply replied with there's only so much I can get these kids to do. Each day their coursework is uploaded to Google Classroom where they have an allotted time to do it but majority don't complete it on time if at all.

Now Classic City High School is a great environment for students to move at their own pace and the use of technology is astounding. After hearing some of the students' stories of how they ended up at Classic City, their only chance of really succeeding in high school is through the use of technology there. One of the students I worked closely with became pregnant at 15 and dropped out of Clarke Central. Her name was Jasmine* and after a year and a half she decided she wanted to get her high school diploma so that she could possibly attend technical college so she could better provide for herself and family. Now if she attended a traditional high school setting, she would have been put back in her freshman year course work and would have had to graduate in four years. This wasn't an option conducive to her lifestyle as she worked part time and she couldn't leave her child for six hours a day. Classic City High School offered Jasmine the chance to get her high school diploma on her own terms and on her own time. She would attend class in the mornings to get as much schoolwork done and then head off to her waitressing job and would be home with her daughter by dinner time. Jasmine told me that within the past year she had been there, she was able to move through her courses more quickly by being able to work from home and that she would be graduating in December of 2018. She was one of the success stories of Classic City but not all students there are like Jasmine who have the drive to graduate. Mr. Smith informed me of one of his students who had been kicked out of the public school system for disciplinary reasons had been at Classic City for almost two years. When he arrived he half of his 11th grade course work completed and still needed the 12th grade curriculum. Because of the more laissez faire structure of the school, he had just finished his 11th grade credits. As Mr. Smith informed from my first day that there was only so much they could do. I only saw

the student once during my time there but due to the environment of you work at your own pace, this student had fallen even farther behind.

Classic City was prepared for these certain situations of students sometimes falling farther behind than in the traditional setting. The administration and teachers were some of the best I had ever experienced even compared to my own high school. I believe that due to its small size and type of school environment allowed for better connections between the staff and students. Every teacher who would come in knew every student's name and had no problems asking them about current events happening in their lives. I was lucky in high school if my graduation coach recognized me in the hallway where as Ms. Mimi knew everyone by name and the status of their course work. She would come in time-to-time and meet with students always with an optimistic attitude. Many of these kids have had difficult experiences with authoritative figures and especially in school settings but every student seemed to trust Ms. Mimi and wouldn't mind meeting with her.

I believe that in Classic City's school environment, one of the only ways to truly get their students motivated was to always have a positive attitude. Majority of Mr. Smith's students were not always up to date with the class and would often be behind. In my experience, if you were behind on assignments, you would have to sit down with your teacher and they would sum it all up to unless you have extenuating circumstances, you are getting a zero and need to pick up the pace. If this was the case at Classic City, a fair amount of students would fail out. When Mr. Smith would check in on the progress of the students, those who had fallen behind would meet with him but he always had nothing but positive things to say. Overhearing certain conversations, he would always make sure

to reaffirm the student of how well they are currently doing and to not feel overwhelmed with the workload. They would make a plan of how they can both proceed so that the student would complete their tasks and he would end their conversations with a high five and “I’m proud of you.” I have only had one teacher ever tell me they were proud of my work in the 10th grade and it has stuck to me to this day. Having a respected teacher informing you of how proud they are of your work is esteem boosting and gives you the feeling of proving to them that you are worth it.

The one thing that makes a great educator is their interactions with their students. Mentoring at Classic City was one of the first times I had gone into a school and helping students in their studies. I was very weary going as I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to connect with the students or be able to help them in their assignments. Being at UGA for several years, certain skills such as proper grammar, paper citations, and analyzing texts have become second nature. My first day helping in Mr. Smith’s class, the 11th grade students were peer editing their creation myths and I was handed one of the students papers to grade. I had a very difficult time following the girl’s paper as she lacked basic grammar rules and her paper was full of misspellings, fragments, and run on sentences. This girl who was in 11th grade English did not know where to put commas or if a sentence was incomplete, which is discouraging as a future educator. This means the school system had failed her. I recall learning these basics as early as second grade and here was a girl at the age of 16 whose teachers must have passed her on so she could leave the school system.

I wondered what was the standard for these children? Was it to just complete the work to the best of their abilities or did these students learn the material but do not care if

its correct? I recalled Diane Ravitch's book, *The Life and Death of the Great American School System*, about the debate of standardized testing and how we've failed our students. In this case, I feel that standardized testing would have helped this girl at an early age by detecting her weaknesses and that she could've gotten the help she needed. However, funding is all determined on how well students do on testing so the lower the testing scores, the less resources that school has to help students like her and that's how we have failed her. We couldn't provide the resources she needed in order to be successful in her school career.

Jasmine was one of the students I worked closely with over the semester and we couldn't have come from more different backgrounds. She comes from a single parent house and was the eldest of three children. Her mother had her at 17 and she lived with her family and grandmother in a small 3 bedroom house. When she became pregnant, she dropped out of school to give birth and raise her baby with her family. She worked two jobs as a waitress and a cleaning lady at one of the hotels in Athens. Jasmine told me of how unhappy she was seeing her former friends at Clarke Central attending football games and hanging out at the movies while she was stuck working or at home caring for her family. One day her younger sister needed help on her biology homework and Jasmine realized that she couldn't help, as she hadn't learned any of the information due to dropping out. She told me that's when she decided she wanted to get her high school diploma so she could be able to help her own daughter with homework when she was old enough to go to school.

It took me several days of being with her to have her open up about her life story. I was in awe as this girl who was four years younger than me had experienced more than

I could fathom. Jasmine comes from a Hispanic family and she informed me it was quite common for her family members not to finish high school, as they needed to work and provide for themselves. I come from a very fortunate family where school was the highest priority and when I was 16, that's all I needed to worry about. I was never unsure of when my next meal would come or if my family had made enough to pay our power bill while Jasmine had the weight of the world on her shoulders. Through the semester Jasmine and I bonded over our love of makeup and how difficult reading Shakespeare was. At the end of class one day she told me that if it wasn't for me tutoring, we would've never met and her last semester of classes wouldn't have been the same without my help. Her saying that meant the world as I told her I didn't know if I was cut out to be a teacher. She reassured me that I was "ight" with a giggle. I was so sad on my last day as I might not see Jasmine again but I know that not only did I make a small impact on her, she left her mark on me.

My experience at Classic City only made me long to for a classroom of my own. I learned that majority of my future students will have little interest in my presence there because they are forced to be at school but the select few, I may leave a small impression. I was astounded by the use of technology at Classic City and think that having such things as the Google classroom is only beneficial. If students miss for illness or other reasons, they can stay up to date on assignments as the hardest thing I dealt with in high school was being sick and missing material from several days. Drawing from my time there, I learned that I need to ready for students from all walks of life. One life lesson from our book club book, *The Line Becomes a River*, is that no matter where you come from and who you are, we re all human with emotions and feelings. Not that I can relate

to every student in Classic City as we come from different parts of life, but I can try and be empathetic and let them know someone cares. Majority of the time I felt as I was a fly on the wall but when I would be asked for help, I sprang to action. I cannot say if I necessarily made a difference but I do think I left an impact on Jasmine. She is one of the first students to give me the validation that I may not be as bad as I thought and that everyday is a learning experience.

Moving forward I will definitely draw from my time at Classic City. I learned from Mr. Smith that patience and positivity is key in order to truly motivate your students. The girl whose paper I edited made me stop and think that every student has their own strengths and weaknesses and as an educator, I must be proactive in getting them the help they deserve. Jasmine gave me the greatest gift of all: allowing me to believe in myself and never shying away because of fear.